

Private life shaped candidate as much as public

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John McCain's campaign for president is built on character, integrity and values.

The handsome Navy pilot who spent more than five years as a prisoner of war. The white-haired senator tirelessly fighting the establishment in Washington. The father reading his 11-year-old son's homework as he sits next to his wife on the Straight Talk Express.

Those are the images the McCain campaign wants voters to remember.

Now there is another, less flattering picture to add to the mosaic: a restless Naval officer with a stalled career who cheated on his wife and left her for a younger, wealthier woman.

McCain has never denied that his personal life has a messy chapter. He always has taken responsibility for his divorce. But a long, detailed article by the New York Times on Sunday focused the spotlight on a dark corner of the Arizona senator's background that few voters knew existed.

According to the newspaper, McCain returned to Jacksonville in 1973 after more than five years as a prisoner of war to find that his wife was a different person. Carol McCain, once a model, had been badly injured in a car wreck in 1969. The article recounts that her injuries "left her 4 inches shorter and on crutches, and she gained a good deal of weight."

By 1979, McCain was concerned that his Naval career was not advancing and pondering his future. He met Cindy Hensley, an attractive 25-year-old woman from a wealthy Arizona family. McCain courted her and married her in May 1980 -- a month after getting a divorce.

Less than a year later, the McCains moved to Arizona where Cindy's family runs one of the country's largest Anheuser-Busch distributorships. A year after that, McCain ran for an open congressional seat and won. He was on his way.

You won't find an account of this period on McCain's Web site. It isn't in his bestselling book, *Faith of My Fathers*, where McCain recounts his military experiences as well as those of his father and grandfather.

Yet this portion of McCain's life is as relevant to voters as his war record.

First, McCain's second marriage enabled him to launch his career as a politician. If he had not married Cindy, he would not have moved to Arizona. He would not have had the financial

resources to lay the groundwork for his first congressional campaign. He would not have been in position to run for Senate or to learn about politics from conservative Barry Goldwater or liberal Mo Udall.

On the campaign trail, McCain jokes about the failed presidential bids by Goldwater, Udall and Bruce Babbitt. "Arizona," he likes to say, "may be the only state where mothers don't tell their sons they can grow up to be president of the United States."

If McCain had not married Cindy, he may have been making a similar joke about Reubin Askew and Florida. But he would not be talking about Arizona.

Second, McCain is not winning primary elections because of detailed position papers. He wings it on most issues, particularly domestic policy. The Arizona senator presents an unanticipated challenge to Texas Gov. George W. Bush because voters like his personal resume and his pledge to restore dignity and integrity to the White House.

Candidates who run on personal character invite more scrutiny of their private lives. If McCain's war record is relevant, so is his divorce file.

Who will try to exploit it?

Probably not Bush. The Texas governor is in no position to raise questions about McCain's personal life when he refuses to provide answers about his own.

Not McCain's ex-wife.

"I'm crazy about John McCain and I love him to pieces," Carol McCain told the New York Times, "but I'm just not going to do interviews."

But others are interested.

A private investigator and the Democratic Party reportedly have gotten copies from McCain's divorce file in Okaloosa County. It's best that voters learn about McCain's life from more objective sources before the mud-slinging begins.

Florida Comptroller Bob Milligan, McCain's state chairman in Florida, said Monday he does not think personal issues such as McCain's divorce resonate as much with voters as they once did. Milligan, a former Marine lieutenant colonel, said it was not unusual for former prisoners of war to come home and find the separation too much for their marriages to overcome.

"When you look at people who serve in the military and who are gone all of the time, in his case 5 1/2 years, plus the service, plus the training, that is very difficult on a family relationship," Milligan said.

McCain's handling of his divorce is instructive.

He accepts full responsibility and takes the blame, just as he has on the campaign trail after claiming he could tell gay people by their mannerisms or using the term "gook" to refer to the North Vietnamese.

He also uses humor. At a town meeting this year, he was asked whether he and Cindy were high school sweethearts. McCain dryly responded, correctly, that his wife wasn't born when he was in high school.

As it has on the campaign trail, McCain's blend of contriteness and charm helped him overcome hard feelings. He long ago won over family and friends who were initially upset by the divorce. Even his first wife remains a friend and supports his campaigns.

Whether voters will be just as forgiving if McCain wins the Republican nomination is an open question.