

Will the Real McCain Please Come Back

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 25, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

John McCain won big and ugly last night. He trounced J. D. Hayworth by a margin of 57 to 32 percent. But, McCain's path to victory was an ugly one.

In the past few months, facing a challenge from his right, McCain "the Maverick" morphed into just another ranter on the right. Gone was the man who had negotiated campaign finance reform with liberal Senator Russ Feingold. Gone was the man who had promoted comprehensive immigration reform with liberal giant Sen. Ted Kennedy. Instead, McCain tacked so far to the right that he lost sight of the truth, asserting that Phoenix had become the "number 2 kidnapping capital in the world," even though it wasn't, and that his flip-flop on immigration was caused, in part, by rising violence along the border, even though crime has fallen in each of the past four years along the border. McCain even denied that he had once been a Maverick.

The question now is: Which John McCain will show up today, now that the primary challenge is over? And which would we want to see? Is it better to have a Senator who has changed his positions and is now committed to them, come what may? Is it better to have someone who was willing to say what he had to say to win re-election, but who will go back to his traditional role of being someone who knows how to broker a deal in the Senate?

It is not such an easy question. No one likes insincerity, but we all make compromises when we have to. There is a story from the 1976 election that explains the occasional necessity for deceit in politics. A group of reporters came to interview Jimmy Carter's mother at her home in Plains, Georgia. The reporters said that her candidate-son had promised he would never lie to the American people, a strong selling point after the swamp of lies that characterized the Nixon years. The reporters asked Miss Lillian if her son had ever lied. She said, "Well I am sure he has probably told a white lie." The reporters replied, "A lie is a lie, isn't it? What is the difference?" Miss Lillian looked at the reporters and said, "Well, I am not sure I can give you a precise definition of a white lie, but I think I can give you an example. A moment ago, when all you reporters came to the door and I said how happy I was to see you." The room erupted in laughter.

So, if McCain had to fudge a little in order to defeat a real fire-breathing conservative, what's the harm? He can't continue to make deals in the Senate, reach across the aisle, get past partisanship and do what is right for the country unless he wins, so you do what ever it takes right?

The problem with this line of thinking is obvious: It corrodes the already corroded relationship between government and governed. If candidates do whatever it takes to win an election, and keep that election process distinct from governance, over time, the citizenry can be forgiven for thinking that politicians are frauds, that government is not something that manifests the popular will, not something that flows from their own ballots, but something other people do, something in which the average American has no stake because the corruption "intellectual and moral" of the political class is so complete.

This phenomenon is bipartisan, to be sure. I once heard a campaign manager for a Democratic gubernatorial candidate complain that people wanted the candidate to be more "forward leaning" on gay marriage, but that he

had to keep his true feelings secret because he couldn't win if he supported gay marriage. I know Democratic candidates who are genuinely horrified by abortion but have convinced themselves that nothing can be done without sacrificing their careers, something few politicians are willing to do.

In McCain's case, I hope we get the old John McCain back. Rumor has it that McCain's staff has been working with Sen. Chuck Shumer's staff on immigration reform at the same time McCain was running anti-immigrant ads back in Arizona. We need senators who are willing to reach across the aisle, who understand that "compromise" is not a dirty word, that legislating is, in fact, about making deals. I get frustrated, at times, with the political stances of Sen. Blanche Lincoln or Sen. Ben Nelson, just as some Republican friends get frustrated with Sen. Olympia Snowe and Sen. Susan Collins. But, we need senators who are willing to stand up to the base of their own party and do what is achievable here and now, to make a compromise that no one loves but everyone can live with.

Nowhere is the need for bipartisanship more obvious than in foreign affairs. For a little more than 40 years, Democratic and Republican presidents all supported the central feature of our foreign policy, containment of the Soviet Union. There were differences at the margins, but in substance, the decisions made by Harry Truman, Dean Acheson, George Kennan, et al., and, critically, GOP Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Arthur Vandenburg, governed the actions of the United States through the end of the Cold War. As America brings its involvement in Iraq to a close, and faces the threats posed by radical Islamicist terrorists, global warming, the rise of China as a major economic and military power, nuclear proliferation and a variety of other threats, is it too much to hope that McCain could do his country proud by becoming in our time what Sen. Vandenburg was to his?

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