

## UP, SIMBA By David Foster Wallace

NB: Mr. Richardson edited this down from 38 to 24 pages. It is still long, but read it all – it is excellent.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ELECTRONIC EDITION, MANDATED AND OVERSEEN BY LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY OR IPUBLISH.COM OR WHATEVER THE ACTUAL VECTOR HERE MIGHT BE

Dear Person Reading This:

This is the part where I'm supposed to say what the following document is and where it came from. From what I understand, this past fall the powers that be at Rolling Stone magazine decided they wanted to get four writers who were not political journalists to do articles on the four big presidential candidates and their day-to-day campaigns in the early primaries. Luckily my own resumé's got 'NOT A POLITICAL JOURNALIST' right at the very top, and Rolling Stone magazine called, and pitched the idea, and furthermore said I could pick whichever candidate I wanted (which of course was flattering, although in retrospect they probably told the other three writers the same thing—magazines are always very flattering and *carte blanche*ish when they're trying to get you to do something). The only one I could see even trying to write about was U.S. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), whom I'd seen a tape of on Charlie Rose in 1999 and had decided was either incredibly honest and forthright and cool or else just insane. There were other reasons for wanting to write about McCain and party politics, too, all of which are explored in considerable detail in the document itself and so I don't see any reason to inflict them on you here.

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I ended up flying out the following week and riding with the McCain2000 traveling press corps from 7 to 13 February, which in retrospect was probably the most interesting and complicated week of the whole GOP race. Especially the complicated part. For it turned out that the more interesting a campaign-related person or occurrence or intrigue or strategy or happenstance was, the more time and page-space it took to make sense of it, or, if it made no sense, to describe what it was and explain why it didn't make sense but was interesting anyway if viewed in a certain context that then itself had to be described, and so on. With the end result being that the actual document delivered per contract to Rolling Stone magazine turned to be longer and more complicated than they'd asked for. Umm, quite a bit longer, actually. In fact the article's editor pointed out that running the whole thing would take up most of Rolling Stone's text-space and might even cut into the percentage of the magazine reserved for advertisements, which obviously would not do.

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There are only a couple changes. All typos and atrocious factual boners have now (hopefully) been fixed, for one thing. There were also certain places where the original article talked about the fact that it was appearing in Rolling Stone magazine and that whoever was reading it was sitting there actually holding a copy of Rolling Stone, etc., and most of these got changed because it just seemed too weird to keep telling you you were reading this in an actual 10" x 12" magazine when you now quite clearly are not. (Again, this was the Electronic Editor's suggestion.) You will note, though, that the author is usually still referred to in the document as '*Rolling Stone*' or '*RS*.' I'm sorry if this looks weird to you, but I have declined to change it. Part of the reason is that I was absurdly proud of my *Rolling Stone* Press Badge and liked it that most of the pencils and campaign staff referred to me as 'the guy from *Rolling Stone*.' I will confess that I even borrowed a friend's battered old black motorcycle-jacket to wear on the Trail so I'd better project the kind of edgy, vaguely dangerous vibe I imagined an *RS* reporter ought to give off. (You have to understand that I hadn't read *Rolling Stone* in quite some time.) Plus, journalistically, my covering the campaign for this particular organ turned out to have a big effect on what I got to see and how various people conducted themselves when I was around. For example, it was the main reason why the McCain2000 High Command pretty much refused to have anything to do with me but why the network techs were so friendly and forthcoming and let me hang around with them (the sound techs, in particular, were *Rolling Stone* fans from way back). Finally, the document itself is sort of rhetorically directed at voters of a particular age-range and attitude, and I'm figuring that the occasional *Rolling Stone* reference might help keep the reasons for some of this rhetoric clear.

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—Guy from *RS* 30 June 2000

## WHO CARES

**OK** so now *yes more* press attention for John S. McCain III, USN, POW, USC, GOP, 2000.com. The Rocky of Politics. The McCain Mutiny. The Real McCain. The Straight Talk Express. Internet fundraiser. Media darling. Navy flier. Middle name Sidney. Son and grandson of admirals. And a serious hard-ass—a way-Right Republican senator from one of the most politically troglodytic states in the nation. A man who opposes *Roe v. Wade*, gun-control, and funding for PBS; who supports the death penalty and defense buildups and constitutional amendments outlawing flag-burning and making school prayer OK. Who voted to convict at Clinton's impeachment trial, twice. And who, starting sometime last fall, has become the great populist hope of American politics. Who wants your vote but won't whore himself to get it, and wants you to vote for him *because* he won't whore. An anticandidate. Who cares.

Facts. The 1996 presidential election had the lowest Young Voter turnout in U.S. history. The 2000 GOP primary in New Hampshire had the highest. And the experts agree that McCain drew most of them. He drew first-time and never-before voters; he drew Democrats and Independents, Libertarians and soft socialists and college kids and soccer moms and weird furtive guys whose affiliations sounded more like terrorist cells than parties, and won by 18 points, and nearly wiped the smirk off Bush<sub>2</sub>'s face. McCain has spurned soft money and bundled money and still raised millions, much of it on the Internet and a lot from people who've never given to a campaign before. On 7 Feb. '00 he's on the cover of all three major newsweeklies at once, and the Shrub is on the run. The next big vote is South Carolina, heart of the true knuckle-dragging Christian Right, where Dixie's flag flutters proud over the Statehouse and the favorite sport is video poker and the state GOP is getting sued over its habit of not even opening polls in black areas on primary day; and when McCain's chartered plane lands here at 0300h. on the night of his New Hampshire win, a good 500 South Carolina college students are waiting to greet him, cheering and waving signs and dancing and holding a weird kind of GOP Rave. Think about this: 500 kids at 3 A.M. out of their minds with enthusiasm for . . . a politician. "It was as if," *Time* said, "[McCain] were on the cover of *Rolling Stone*," giving the Rave all kinds of attention.

And of course attention breeds attention, as any marketer can tell you. And so now more attention, from the aforementioned Ur-liberal *Rolling Stone* itself, whose editors send the least professional pencil they can find to spend a week on the campaign with McCain and *Time* and the *Times* and CNN and MSNBC and MTV and all the rest of this country's great digital engine of public fuss. Does John McCain deserve all this? Is the attention real attention, or just hype? Is there a difference? Can it help him get elected? Should it?

A better question: Do you even give a shit whether McCain can or ought to win. Since you're digitally cutting-edge enough to buy something you can read only on your PC or Rocket-e or PDA or whatever, the chances are good that you are an American between say 18 and 40, which demographically would make you a Young Voter. And no generation of Young Voters has ever cared less about politics and politicians than yours. There's hard demographic and voter-pattern data backing this up . . . assuming you give a shit about data. In fact, even if you've already paid your \$4.95 Download Fee or whatever, the chances are probably only about fifty-fifty that you'll read this whole document once you've seen what it's really about—such is the enormous shuddering yawn that the Political Process tends to evoke in us, especially now, in this post-Watergate-post-Iran-Contra-post-Whitewater-post-Lewinsky era, an era when politicians' statements of principle or vision are understood as self-serving ad copy and judged not for their truth or ability to inspire but for their tactical shrewdness, their marketability. And no generation has been marketed and Spun and pitched to as ingeniously and relentlessly as today's demographic Young. So when Senator John McCain says, in Michigan or SC, "I run for president not to Be Somebody, but to Do Something," it's hard to hear it as anything more than a marketing angle, especially when he says it as he's going around surrounded by cameras and reporters and cheering crowds . . . in other words, Being Somebody.

And when Senator John McCain also says—constantly, thumping it hard at the start and end of every speech and THM—that his goal as president will be "to inspire young Americans to devote themselves to causes greater than their own self-interest," it's hard not to hear it as just one more piece of the carefully scripted bullshit that presidential candidates hand us as they go about the self-interested business of trying to become the most powerful, important, and talked-about human being on earth, which is of course their real "cause," a cause to which they appear to be so deeply devoted that they can swallow and spew whole mountains of noble-

sounding bullshit and convince even themselves they mean it. Cynical as that may sound, polls show it's how most of us feel. And it's beyond not believing the bullshit; mostly we don't even *hear* it, dismiss it at the same deep level, below attention, where we also block out billboards and Muzak.

One of the things that makes John McCain's "causes greater than self-interest" line harder to dismiss, though, is that this guy also sometimes says things that are manifestly true but which no other mainstream candidate will say. Such as that special-interest money, billions of it, controls Washington and that all this "reforming politics" and "cleaning up Washington" stuff that every candidate talks about will remain impossible until certain well-known campaign-finance scams like soft money and bundles are outlawed. All Congress's talk about health-care reform and a Patients' Bill of Rights, for example, McCain has said publicly is total bullshit because the GOP is in the pocket of HMO lobbies and the Democrats are funded and controlled by trial lawyers' lobbies, and it is in these backers' self-interest to see that the current insane U.S. health-care system stays just the way it is.

But health-care reform is politics, and so's marginal tax rates, and defense procurement, and Social Security, and politics is boring—complex, abstract, dry, the province of policy wonks and Rush Limbaugh and nerdy little guys on PBS, and basically who cares.

But there's something underneath politics here, something riveting and unSpinnable and true. It has to do with McCain's military background and Vietnam combat and the five-plus years he spent in a North Vietnamese prison, mostly in solitary, in a box-sized cell, getting tortured and starved. And with the unbelievable honor and balls he showed there. It's very easy to gloss over the POW thing, partly because we've all heard so much about it and partly because it's so off-the-charts dramatic, like something in a movie instead of a man's real life. But it's worth considering for a minute, carefully, because it's what makes McCain's "causes greater than self-interest" thing easier to hear.

Here's what happened. In October of '67 McCain was himself still a Young Voter and was flying his 26<sup>th</sup> Vietnam combat mission and his A-4 Skyhawk plane got shot down over Hanoi, and he had to eject, which basically means setting off an explosive charge that blows your seat out of the plane, which ejection broke both McCain's arms and one leg and gave him a concussion and he started falling out of the skies over Hanoi. Try to imagine for a second how much this would hurt and how scared you'd be, three limbs broken and falling toward the enemy capital you just tried to bomb. His chute opened late and he landed hard in a little lake in a park right in the middle of downtown Hanoi. (There is still an N.V. statue of McCain by this lake today, showing him on his knees with his hands up and eyes scared and on the pediment the inscription "McCan—famous air pirate" [*sic*].) Imagine treading water with broken arms and trying to pull the lifevest's toggle with your teeth as a crowd of North Vietnamese men swim out toward you (there's film of this, somebody had a home-movie camera and the N.V. government released it, though it's grainy and McCain's face is hard to see). The crowd pulled him out and then just about killed him. U.S. bomber pilots were especially hated, for obvious reasons. McCain got bayoneted in the groin; a soldier broke his shoulder apart with a rifle butt. Plus by this time his right knee was bent 90° to the side with the bone sticking out. This is all public record. Try to imagine it. He finally got tossed on a Jeep and taken only like five blocks to the infamous Hoa Lo prison—a.k.a. the Hanoi Hilton, of much movie fame—where they made him beg a week for a doctor and finally set a couple of the fractures without anesthetic and let two other fractures and the groin wound (imagine: *groin wound*) stay like they were. Then they threw him in a cell. Try for a moment to feel this. The media profiles all talk about how McCain still can't lift his arms over his head to comb his hair, which is true. But try to imagine it at the time, yourself in his place, because it's important. Think about how *diametrically* opposed to your own self-interest getting knifed in the balls and having fractures set without a general would be, and then about getting thrown in a cell to just lie there and hurt, which is what happened. He was mostly delirious with pain for weeks, and his weight dropped to 100, and the other POWs were sure he would die; and then, after he'd hung on like that for several months and his bones had mostly knitted and he could sort of stand up, they brought him to the prison commandant's office and closed the door and out of nowhere offered to let him go. They said he could just . . . leave. It turned out that U.S. Admiral John S. McCain II had just been made head of all naval forces in the Pacific, meaning also Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese wanted the PR coup of mercifully releasing his son, the baby-killer. And John S. McCain III, 100 lbs and barely able to stand, refused the offer. The U.S. military's Code of Conduct for Prisoners of War apparently said that POWs had to be released in the order they were captured, and there were others who'd been in Hoa Lo a way longer time, and McCain refused to violate the Code. The prison

commandant, not pleased, right there in the office had guards break McCain's ribs, rebreak his arm, knock his teeth out. McCain still refused to leave without the other POWs. Forget how many movies stuff like this happens in and try to imagine it as real. Refusing release. He spent four more years in Hoa Lo like this, much of the time in solitary, in the dark, in a special closet-sized box called a "punishment cell." Maybe you've heard all this before; it's been in umpteen different profiles of McCain this year. It's overexposed, true. Still though, take a second or two to do some creative visualization and imagine the moment between McCain getting offered early release and his turning it down. Try to imagine it was you. Imagine how loudly your most basic, primal self-interest would have cried out to you in that moment, and all the ways you could rationalize accepting the offer: What difference would one less POW make? Plus maybe it'd give the other POWs hope and keep them going, and I mean 100 pounds and expected to die and surely the Code of Conduct doesn't apply to you if you need a real doctor or else you're going to die, plus if you could stay alive by getting out you could make a promise to God to do nothing but Total Good from now on and make the world better and so your accepting would be better for the world than your refusing, and maybe if Dad wasn't worried about the Vietnamese retaliating against you here in prison he could prosecute the war more aggressively and end it sooner and actually save lives so you could actually *save lives* if you took the offer and got out versus what real purpose gets served by you staying here in a box and getting beaten to death, and by the way oh Jesus imagine it a real doctor and real surgery and painkillers and clean sheets and a chance to heal and not be in agony and to see your kids again, your wife, to smell your wife's hair . . . can you hear it? What would be happening in your head? Would you have refused the offer? *Could* you have? You can't know for sure. None of us can. It's hard even to imagine the levels of pain and fear and want in that moment, much less to know how you'd react. None of us can know.

But, see, we *do* know how this man reacted. That he chose to spend four more years there, mostly in a dark box, alone, tapping code on the walls to the others, rather than violate a Code. Maybe he was nuts. But the point is that with McCain it feels like we *know*, for a proven *fact*, that he is capable of devotion to something other, more, than his own self-interest. So that when he says the line in speeches now you can feel like maybe it's not just more candidate bullshit, that with this guy it's maybe the truth. Or maybe both the truth *and* bullshit: McCain does want your vote, after all.

But that moment in the Hoa Lo office in '68—right before he refused, with all his basic normal human self-interest howling at him—that moment is hard to blow off. All week, all through MI and SC and all the tedium and cynicism and paradox of the campaign (see *sub*), that moment seems to underlie McCain's "greater than self-interest" line, moor it, give it a weird sort of reverb it's hard to ignore. The fact is that John McCain is a genuine hero of the only kind Vietnam now has to offer, a hero not because of what he did but because of what he suffered—voluntarily, for a Code. This gives him the moral authority both to utter lines about causes beyond self-interest and to expect us, even in this age of Spin and lawyerly cunning, to believe he means them. And yes, literally: "moral authority," that old cliché, much like so many other clichés—"service," "honor," "duty," "patriotism"—that have become just mostly words now, slogans invoked by men in nice suits who want something from us. The John McCain of recent seasons, though—arguing for his doomed campaign-finance bill on the Senate floor in '98, calling his colleagues crooks to their faces on C-SPAN, talking openly about a bought-and-paid-for government on *Charlie Rose* in July '99, unpretentious and bright as hell in the Iowa debates and New Hampshire THMs—something about him made a lot of us feel the guy wanted something different from us, something more than votes or dollars, something old and maybe corny but with a weird achy pull to it like a smell from childhood or a name on the tip of your tongue, something that would make us hear clichés as more than just clichés and start trying to think about what terms like "service" and "sacrifice" and "honor" might really *refer* to, like whether they actually *stood* for something, maybe. To think about whether anything past well-Spun self-interest might be real, was ever real, and if so then what happened? These, for the most part, are not lines of thinking that the culture we've grown up in has encouraged Young Voters to pursue. Why do you suppose that is?

## **GLOSSARY OF RELEVANT CAMPAIGN TRAIL VOCAB, MOSTLY COURTESY OF JIM C. AND THE NETWORK NEWS TECHS**

22.5= The press corps' shorthand for McCain's opening remarks at *THM*s (see *THM*), which remarks are

always the same and always take exactly 22½ minutes.

**B-film**= Innocuous little audio-free shots of McCain doing public stuff—shaking hands, signing books, getting *scrummed* (see *Scrum*), etc.—for use behind a TV voice-over report on the day’s campaigning, as in “The reason the *techs* (see *Tech*) have to *feed* (see *Feed*) so much irrelevant and repetitive daily footage is that they never know what the network wants to use for *B-film*.”

**Baggage Call**= The grotesquely early A.M. time, listed on the next day’s schedule (N.B.: The last vital media-task of the day is making sure to get the next day’s schedule from Travis), when you have to get your suitcase back in the bus’s bowels and have a seat staked out and be ready to go or else you get left behind and have to try to wheedle a ride to the first *THM* (see *THM*) from FoxNews, which is a drag in all kinds of ways.

**Bundled Money**= A way to get around the Federal Election Commission’s \$1,000 limit for individual campaign contributions. A wealthy donor can give \$1,000 for himself, then he can say that yet another \$1,000 comes from his wife, and another \$1,000 from his kid, and another from his Aunt Edna, etc. The *Shrub*’s (see *Shrub*) favorite trick is to designate CEOs and other top corporate executives as “Pioneers,” who each pledge to raise \$100,000 for Bush2000—\$1,000 comes from them individually, and the other 99 one-grand contributions come “voluntarily” from their employees. McCain makes a point of accepting neither *bundled money* nor *soft money* (see *Soft Money*).

**Cabbage (v)**= To beg, divert, or outright steal food from one of the many supertime campaign events at which McCain’s audience sits at tables and gets supper and the press corps has to stand around at the back of the room and gets nothing.

**DT**= Drive Time, the slots in the daily schedule set aside for caravanning from one campaign event to another.

**F&F**= An hour or two in the afternoon when the campaign provides downtime and an *F&F* Room for the press corps to *file* and *feed* (see *File and Feed*).

**File and Feed**= What print and broadcast press, respectively, have to do every day, i.e. print reporters have to finish their daily stories and *file* them via fax or email to their papers, while the *techs* (see *Tech*) and field producers have to find a satellite or *Gunner* (see *Gunner*) and *feed* their film, *B-film*, *standups* (see *Standup*), and anything else their bosses might want to the network HQ. (For alternate meaning of *feed*, see *Pool*.)

**Head**= Local or network TV correspondent (see also *Talent*).

**OTC**= Opportunity To Crash, meaning a chance to grab a nap on the bus (placement and posture variable).

**ODT**= Optimistic Drive Time, which refers to the daily schedule’s nagging habit of underestimating the amount of time it takes to get from one event to another, causing the Straight Talk Express driver to speed like a maniac and to incur the rabid dislike of Jay and the Bullshit 2 driver (on the night of 9 Feb., one BS2 driver actually quit on the spot after an especially hair-rising ride from Greenville to Clemson U., and an emergency replacement driver [who wore a brown cowboy hat with two NRA pins on the brim and was so obsessed with fuel economy that he refused ever to turn on BS2’s generator, causing all BS2 press who needed working AC outlets to crowd onto BS1 and turning BS2 into a veritable moving tomb used only for *OTC* s] had to be flown in from Cincinnati, which is apparently the bus company’s HQ).

**OTS**= Opportunity To Smoke.

**Pencil**= A member of the Trail’s print press.

**Pool (v)**= Refers to occasions when, because of space restrictions or McCain2000 fiat, only one network camera-and-sound team is allowed into an event, and by convention all the other networks get to *feed* (meaning, in this case, *pool*) that one team’s tape.

**React (n)**= McCain’s or McCain2000 High Command’s on-record response to a sudden major development in the campaign, usually some tactical move or allegation from the *Shrub* (see *Shrub*).

**Scrum (n)**= The moving 360° ring of *techs* (see *Tech*) and *heads* around a candidate as he makes his way from the Straight Talk Express into an event or vice versa; (v) to gather around a moving candidate in such a ring.

**Shrub, the**= GOP presidential candidate George W. Bush (also sometimes referred to as “Dubya” and/or “Bush<sub>2</sub>”).

**Soft Money**= The best-known way to finesse the FEC’s limit on campaign contributions. Enormous sums are here given to a certain candidate’s political party instead of to the candidate, but the party then by some strange coincidence ends up dispersing those enormous sums to exactly the candidate the donor had wanted to give to in the first place.

**Standup**= A *head* giving a remote report from some event McCain's at.

**Stick**= A sound *tech*'s (see *Tech*) black telescoping polymer rod (full extension = 9'7") with a boom microphone at the end, used mostly for *scrums* and always the most distinctive visible feature thereof because of the way a fully extended *stick* wobbles when the sound *tech* (which, again, see *Tech*) walks with it.

**Talent**= A marquee network *head* who flies in for just one day, gets briefed by a field producer, and does a *standup* on the campaign, as in "We got *talent* coming in tomorrow, so I need to get all this *B-film* archived." Recognizable talent this week includes B. Schieffer of CBS, D. Bloom of NBC, and J. Woodruff of CNN.

**Tech**= A TV news camera or sound technician. (N.B.: In the McCain corps this week, all the *techs* are male, while over 80% of the field producers are female. No reasonable explanation ever obtained.)

**THM**= Town Hall Meeting, McCain2000's signature campaign event, where the 22.5 is followed by an hour-long unscreened Q&A with the audience.

## SUBSTANTIALLY FARTHER BEHIND THE SCENES THAN YOU'RE APT TO WANT TO BE

It's now precisely 1330h. on Tuesday, 8 February 2000, on Bullshit 1, proceeding southeast on I-26 back toward Charleston SC. There's now so much press and staff and techs and stringers and field producers and photographers and heads and pencils and political columnists and hosts of political radio shows and local media covering John McCain and the McCain2000 phenomenon that there's more than one campaign bus. Here in South Carolina there are three, a veritable convoy of Straight Talk, plus FoxNews's green SUV and the MTV crew's sprightly red Corvette and two much-antennae'd local TV vans (one of which has muffler trouble). On DTs like this McCain's always in his personal red recliner next to Mike Murphy's red recliner in the little press salon he and political consultant Mike Murphy have in the back of the lead bus, the well-known Straight Talk Express, which is up ahead and already receding. The Straight Talk Express's driver is a leadfoot and the other drivers hate him. Bullshit 1 is the caravan's second bus, a luxury Grumman with good current and workable phonejacks, and a lot of the national pencils use it to pound out copy on their laptops and send faxes and email stuff to their editors. The campaign's logistics are dizzyingly complex, and one of the things the McCain2000 staff has to do is rent different buses and decorate the nicest one with **STRAIGHT TALK EXPRESS** and **MCCAIN2000.COM** in each new state. In Michigan yesterday there was just the S.T.E plus one bus for non-elite press, which had powder-gray faux-leather couches and gleaming brushed-steel fixtures and a mirrored ceiling from front to back; it creeped everyone out and was christened the Pimpmobile. The two press buses in South Carolina are known as Bullshit 1 and Bullshit 2, names conceived as usual by the extremely cool and laid-back NBC News cameraman Jim C. and—to their credit—immediately seized on and used with great glee at every opportunity by McCain's younger Press Liaisons, who are themselves so cool and unpretentious it's tempting to suspect that they are *professionally* cool and unpretentious.

McCain just got done giving a Major Policy Address on crime and punishment at the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy in Columbia, which is where the caravan is heading back to Charleston from. It was a resoundingly scary speech, delivered in a large airless cinderblock auditorium surrounded by razorwire and guard towers (the S.C.C.J.A. adjoined a penal institution so closely that it wasn't at all clear where one left off and the other began) and introduced by some kind of very high-ranking Highway Patrol officer whose big hanging gut and face the color of rare steak seemed right out of Southern-law-enforcement central casting and who spoke approvingly and at some length about Senator McCain's military background and his 100% conservative voting record on crime, punishment, firearms, and the War on Drugs. This wasn't a Town Meeting Q&A-type thing; it was a Policy Address, one of three this week prompted by Bush2000's charges that McCain is fuzzy on policy, that he's image over substance. The speech's putative audience was 350 neckless young men and women sitting at attention (if that's possible) in arrow-straight rows of folding chairs, with another couple hundred law-enforcement pros in Highway Patrol hats and mirrored shades standing at Parade Rest behind them, and then behind and around all these the media—the actual audience for the speech—including NBC's Jim C. and his sound man Frank C. (no relation) and the rest of the network techs on the ever-present fiberboard riser facing the stage and filming McCain, who as is S.O.P. first thanks a whole lot of local people nobody's heard of and then w/o ado jumps right in to what's far and away the scariest speech of the week, backed as

always by a 30' x 50' American flag so that when you see B-film of these things on TV it's McCain and the flag, the flag and McCain, a visual conjunction all the candidates try to hammer home. The seated cadets—none of whom fidget or scratch or move in any way except to blink in what looks like perfect sync—wear identical dark-brown khakis and junior models of the same round big-brimmed hats their elders wear, so that they look like ten perfect rows of brutal and extremely attentive forest rangers. McCain, who simply does not ever perspire, is wearing a dark suit and wide tie and has the only dry forehead in the hall. U.S. Rep. Lindsey Graham (R-SC, of impeachment-trial fame) and U.S. Rep. Mark Sanford (R-SC, rated the single most fiscally conservative member of the '98-'00 Congress) are up there on stage behind McCain as is S.O.P.; they're sort of his living Letters of Introduction down here this week. Graham, as usual, looks like he slept in his suit, whereas Sanford is tan and urbane in a V-neck sweater and Guccis whose shine you could read by. Mrs. Cindy McCain is up there too as always, brittly composed and smiling at the air in front of her and thinking about God knows what. Half the buses' press don't listen to the speech; most of them are at different spots at the very back of the gym, walking in little unconscious circles with their cellular phones. (You should be apprised upfront that national reporters spend an enormous amount of time either on their cellphones or waiting for their cellphones to ring. It is not an exaggeration to say that when somebody's cellphone breaks they almost have to be sedated.) The techs for CBS, NBC, CNN, ABC, and Fox will film the whole speech, plus any remarks afterward, then they'll unbolt their cameras from the tripods and go mobile and scrum McCain's exit and the brief Press-Avail at the door to the Straight Talk Express, and then the field producers will call network HQ and summarize the highlights and HQ will decide which five- or ten-second snippet gets used for the nightly bit on the GOP campaign.

It helps to conceive a campaign week's events in terms of boxes, boxes inside other boxes, etc. The national voting audience is the great huge outer box, then the SC-electorate audience, mediated respectively by the inner layers of national and local press, just inside which lie the insulating boxes of McCain's staff's High Command who plan and stage events and Spin stuff for the layers of press to interpret for the layers of audience, and the Press Liaisons who shepherd the pencils and heads and mediate their access to the High Command and control which media get rotated onto the S.T. Express (which is itself a box in motion) and then decide which of these chosen media then get to move all the way into the extreme rear's salon to interface with McCain himself, who is the campaign's narrator and narrative at once, a candidate whose biggest draw of course is that he's an anticandidate, someone who's open and accessible and "thinks outside the box," but who is in fact the campaign's Chinese boxes' central and inscrutable core box, and whose own intracranial thoughts on all these boxes and layers and lenses and on whether this new kind of enclosure is anything like Hoa Lo's dark box are pretty much anyone in the media's guess, since all he'll talk about is politics.

Plus Bullshit 1 is also a box, of course, just as anything you can't exit till somebody else lets you out becomes, and right now there are 27 members of the national political media on board, halfway to Charleston. A certain percentage of them aren't worth introducing you to because they'll get rotated back off the Trail tonight and be gone tomorrow, replaced by somebody else you'll just start to recognize by the time they rotate out. That's what these pros call it, the Trail, the same way musicians talk about the Road. The schedule is fascist: Wakeup call and backup alarm at 0600h., Express Checkout, Baggage Call at 0700 to throw bags and techs' gear under the bus, haul ass to McCain's first THM at 0800, then another, then another, maybe an hour off to F&F someplace if ODTs permit, then usually two big evening events, plus hours of dead highway DT between functions, finally getting in to that night's Marriott or Hampton Inn at like 2300 just when Room Service closes so you're begging rides from FoxNews to find a restaurant still open, then an hour at the hotel bar to try to shut your head off so you can hit the rack at 0130 and get up at 0600 and do it all again. Usually it's four to six days for the average pencil and then you go off home on a gurney and your editor rotates in fresh meat. The network techs, who are old hands at the Trail, stay on for months at a time. The McCain2000 staff have all been doing this full-time since Labor Day, and even the young ones look like the walking dead. Only McCain seems to thrive. He's 63 and practically Rockette-kicks onto the Express every morning. It's either inspiring or frightening.

...

Here's a quick behind-the-scenes tour of everything that's happening on BS1 at 1330h. A few of the press are slumped over sleeping, open-mouthed and twitching, using their topcoats for pillows. The CBS and NBC techs are in their usual place on the couches way up front, their cameras and sticks and boom mikes and boxes of tapes and big Duracells piled around them, discussing obscure stand-up comedians of the early '70s and trading

Press Badges from New Hampshire and Iowa and Delaware, which Press Badges are laminated and worn around the neck on nylon cords and apparently have a certain value for collectors.

... Behind the buses' digestive areas is another little lounge, which up on the Express serves as McCain's press salon but which on Bullshit 1 is just an elliptic table [...] plus a fax machine and multiple jacks and outlets, the whole area known to the Press Liaisons as the ERPP (= Extreme Rear Press Palace). Right now Mrs. McCain's personal assistant on the Trail, Wendy—who has electric-blue contact lenses and very complex and rigid blond hair and designer outfits and immaculate makeup and accessories and French nails and can perhaps best be described as a very *Republican* -looking young lady indeed—is back here at the beige table eating a large styrofoam cup of soup and using her cellphone to try to find someplace in downtown Charleston where Mrs. McCain can get her nails done. [...] Just why Wendy is arranging for her mistress's manicure on a press bus is unclear, but Mrs. McC.'s sedulous attention to her own person's dress and grooming is already a minor legend among the press corps, and some of the techs speculate that things like getting her nails and hair done, together with being almost Siametically attached to Ms. Lisa Graham Keegan (who is AZ's Education Superintendent and supposedly traveling with the Senator as his "Advisor on Issues Affecting Education" but is quite obviously really along because she's Cindy McCain's friend and confidante and the lone person in whose presence Mrs. McC. doesn't look like a jacklighted deer), are the only things keeping this extremely fragile person together on the Trail, where she's required to stand under hot lights next to McCain at every speech and THM and Press-Avail and stare cheerfully into the middle distance while her husband speaks to crowds and lenses—in fact some of the cable-network techs have a sort of running debate about what Cindy McCain's really looking at as she stands onstage being scrutinized but never getting to say anything . . . and anyway everybody understands and respects the enormous pressure Wendy's under to help Mrs. McC. keep it together, and nobody makes fun of her for things like getting more and more stressed as it becomes obvious that there's some special Southeast-U.S. idiom for "manicure" that Wendy doesn't know, because nobody she talks to on the cellphone seems to have any idea what she means by "manicure." Also back here, directly across from Wendy, is an unbelievably handsome guy in a very green cotton turtleneck, a photographer for Reuters, sitting disconsolate in a complex nest of wires plugged into just about every jack in the ERPP; he's got digital photos of the Columbia speech in his Toshiba laptop and has his cellphone plugged into both the wall and the laptop (which is itself plugged into the wall) and is trying to file the pictures via some weird inter-Reuters email, except his laptop has decided it doesn't like his cellphone anymore ("like" = his term) and he can't get it to file.

If this all seems really static and dull, by the way, then understand that you're getting a bona fide media-eye look at the reality of life on the Trail, 85% of which consists of wandering around killing time on Bullshit 1 while you wait for the slight meaningful look from Travis that means he's gotten the word from his immediate superior Todd (28 and so obviously a Harvard alum it wasn't worth asking) that after the next stop you're getting rotated up into the big leagues on the Express to sit squished and paralyzed on the crammed red press-couch in back and to listen to John S. McCain and Mike Murphy answer the Twelve Monkeys' questions and to look up-close and personal at McCain and the way he puts his legs way out on the salon's floor and crosses them at the ankle and sucks absently at his right bicuspid and twirls the coffee in his McCain2000.com mug and to try to penetrate the innermost box of this man's thoughts on the enormous hope and enthusiasm he's generating in press and voters alike . . . which you should be told up-front does not and cannot happen, this penetration, for two reasons. The smaller reason (1) is that when you are finally rotated up into the Straight Talk salon you discover that most of the questions the Twelve Monkeys ask back here are simply too vapid and obvious for McCain to waste time on, and he lets Mike Murphy handle them, and Murphy is so funny and dry and able to make such deliciously cruel sport of the 12M—

**MONKEY:**If, say, you win here in South Carolina, what do you do then?

**MURPHY:**Fly to Michigan that night.

**MONKEY:**And what if, hypothetically, you, say, lose here in South Carolina?

**MURPHY:**Fly to Michigan that night win or lose.

**MONKEY:**Can you perhaps talk about why?

**MURPHY:**'Cause the plane's already paid for.

**MONKEY:**I think he means can you explain why specifically Michigan?

**MURPHY:**'Cause it's the next primary.



**MONKEY:**I think what we're trying to get you to elaborate on if you will Mike is: what will your goal be in Michigan?

**MURPHY:**To get a whole lot of votes. That's part of our secret strategy for winning the nomination.—that it's often hard even to notice McCain's there or what his face or feet are doing because it takes almost all your concentration not to start giggling like a maniac at Murphy and the way the 12M all nod somberly at him and take down whatever he says in their identical steno notebooks. The larger and more complex reason (2) is that this also happens to be the week in which John S. McCain's anticandidate status threatens to dissolve before almost everyone's eyes and he becomes increasingly opaque and paradoxical and in certain ways indistinguishable as an entity from the Shrub and GOP Establishment against which he'd defined himself and shone so in New Hampshire, which of course is a whole other story.

...

[News crew is looking for a section of McCain's speech to feed to their network]

There's a nice opportunity for cynicism here re the media's idea of "fighting words" as the CNN crew FFs through the speech, Jim McM. (who looks exactly like what Michael J. Fox would look like if Michael J. Fox had a weird blunt East-Bloc haircut) eating his fifth Krispy Kreme of the day and awaiting Mark's signal, Jonathan Karl polishing his glasses on his tie, Mark A. leaning forward with his eyes closed in aural concentration; and right behind Mark's massive shoulder, at the rear edge of the front starboard couch, is NBC camera tech Jim C., who has a bad case of the Campaign Flu, pouring more blood-red tincture of elderberry into a bottle of spring water, his expression carefully stoic because the elderberry remedy's been provided by his wife, who happens to be the NBC crew's field producer and is right across the aisle on the port couch watching him closely to see that he drinks it, and it'll be fun to hear Jim C. make fun of the elderberry later when she's not around. Cynicism: the fact that John McCain in this morning's speech several times invoked a "moral poverty" in America, a "loss of shame" that he blamed on "the ceaseless assault of violence-driven entertainment that has lost its moral compass to greed" (McCain's metaphors tend to mix a bit when he gets excited), and made noises that sounded rather like proposing possible federal regulation of all U.S. entertainment, which would have interesting First Amendment consequences to say the least—this holds no immediate interest for CNN. Nor are they hunting for the hair-raising place in the speech where McCain declared that our next president should be considered "Commander in Chief of the War on Drugs" and granted the authority to send both money and (it sounded like) *troops*, if necessary, into "nations that seem to need assistance controlling their exports of poisons that threaten our children." When you consider that state control of the media is one of the big evils we point to to distinguish liberal democracies from repressive regimes, and that sending troops to "assist" in the internal affairs of sovereign nations has gotten the U.S. into some of its worst pickles of the last half-century, these parts of McCain's speech seem like "fighting words" that a mature democratic electorate might care to hear the news talk about. But we don't care, apparently, and so the networks don't either. In fact, it's possible to argue that a big reason why so many young Independents and Democrats are excited about McCain is that the campaign media focuses so much attention on McCain's piss-and-vinegar candor and so little attention on the sometimes *extremely* scary Right-Wing stuff that this candor drives him to say . . . but no matter, because what's really riveting here at BS1's starboard table right now is what happens to McCain's face on the Sony SX's screen as they FF through the speech's dull specifics. McCain has white hair (premature, from Hoa Lo) and dark eyebrows, and a pink scalp under something that isn't quite a comb-over, and kind of chubby cheeks, and in a regular analog Fast Forward you'd expect his face to look silly, the way everybody on film looks spastic and silly when they're FF'd. But CNN's tape and editing equipment are digital, so what happens on FF is that the shoulders-up view of McCain against eight of the big flag's stripes doesn't speed up and get silly but rather just kind of *explodes* into digital boxes and cubes, and these cubes jumble wildly around and bulge and recede and collapse and whirl and rearrange themselves at a furious FF pace, and the resultant image is like something out of the worst acid trip of all time, a sort of physiognomic Rubik's Cube's constituent squares and boxes flying around and changing shape and sometimes seeming right on the edge of becoming a human face but never quite resolving into a face, on the high-speed screen.

### **WHO EVEN CARES WHO CARES**

**It's** hard to get good answers to why most Young Voters are so uninterested in politics. This is probably because it's next to impossible to get someone to think hard about why he's not interested in something. The

boredom itself preempts inquiry; the fact of the feeling's enough. Surely one reason, though, is that politics is not cool. Or say rather that cool, interesting, alive people do not seem to be the ones who are drawn to the Political Process. Think back to the sort of kids in high school or college who were into running for student office: dweeby, overgroomed, obsequious to authority, ambitious in a sad way. Eager to play the Game. The kind of kids other kids would want to beat up if it didn't seem so pointless and dull. And now consider some of 2000's adult versions of these very same kids: Al Gore, best described by CNN sound tech Mark A. as "amazingly lifelike"; Steve Forbes with his wet forehead and loony giggle; G. Bush<sub>2</sub>'s patrician smirk and mangled cant; even Clinton himself with his big red fake-friendly face and "I feel your pain." Men who aren't enough like human beings even to dislike—what one feels when they loom into view is just an overwhelming lack of interest, the sort of deep disengagement that is so often a defense against pain. Against sadness. In fact, the likeliest reason why so many of us care so little about politics is that modern politicians make us sad, hurt us deep down in ways that are hard even to name, much less talk about. It's way easier to roll your eyes and not give a shit. You probably don't want to hear about all this, even.

One reason a lot of the media on the Trail like John McCain is simply that he's a cool guy. Nondweeby. In school, Clinton was in Student Government and Band, whereas McCain was a multisport jock and hellraiser whose talents for partying and getting laid are still spoken of with awe by former classmates, a guy who graduated near the bottom of his class at Annapolis and got in trouble for flying jets too low and cutting power lines and crashing all the time and generally being cool. At 63, he's funny, and smart, and he'll make fun of himself and his wife and staff and other pols and the Trail, and he'll tease the press and give them shit in a way they don't ever mind because it's the sort of shit that makes you feel like here's this very cool, important guy who's noticing you and liking you enough to give you shit. Sometimes he'll wink at you for no reason. If all this doesn't sound like that big a deal, you have to remember that most of these pro reporters have to spend a lot of time around politicians, and most politicians are painful to be around. As one national pencil told *Rolling Stone* and another nonpro, "If you saw more of how the other candidates conduct themselves, you'd be way more impressed with [McCain]. It's that he acts somewhat in the ballpark of the way a real human being would act." And the grateful press on the Trail transmit—maybe even exaggerate—McCain's humanity to their huge audience, the electorate, which electorate in turn seems so paroxysmically thankful for a presidential candidate *somewhat in the ballpark of a real human being* that it has to make you stop and think about how starved voters are for just some minimal level of genuineness in the men who want to "lead" and "inspire" them.

There are, of course, still some groups of Young Voters way, way into modern politics. There's Rowdy Ralph Reed's far-Right Christians for one, and then way out at the other end of the spectrum there's ACT UP and the sensitive men and angry womyn of the PC Left. What's interesting is that what gives these small fringe blocs so much power is the basic failure of mainstream Young Voters to get off their ass and vote. It's like we all learned in Social Studies back in jr. high: if I vote and you don't, my vote counts double. And it's not just the fringes that benefit—the fact is that it's to some very powerful Establishments' advantage that most younger people hate politics and don't vote. This, too, deserves to be thought about, if you can stand it.

There's another thing John McCain always says. He makes sure he concludes every speech and THM with it, so the buses' press hear it about a hundred times this week. He always pauses a second for effect and then says: "I'm going to tell you something. I may have said some things here today that maybe you don't agree with, and I might have said some things you hopefully do agree with. But I will always. Tell you. The truth." This is McCain's closer, his last big reverb on the six-string as it were. And the frenzied standing-O it always gets from his audience is something to see. But you have to wonder: why do these crowds from Detroit to Charleston cheer so wildly at a simple promise not to lie?

Well it's obvious why. When McCain says it, the people are cheering not for him so much as for how good it feels to believe him. They're cheering the loosening of a weird sort of knot in the electoral tummy. McCain's resumé and candor, in other words, promise not empathy with voters' pain, but relief from it. Because we've been lied to and lied to, and it hurts to be lied to. It's ultimately just about that complicated: it hurts. We learn this at like age four—it's grownups' first explanation to us of why it's bad to lie ("How would *you* like it if . . . ?"). And we keep learning for years, from hard experience, that getting lied to sucks: it diminishes you, denies you respect for yourself, for the liar, for the world. Especially if the lies are chronic, systemic, if experience seems to teach that everything you're supposed to believe in's really just a game based on lies. Young Voters have been taught well and thoroughly. You may not personally remember Vietnam or Watergate,

but it's a good bet you remember "No new taxes" and "Out of the loop" and "No direct knowledge of any impropriety at this time" and "Did not inhale" and "Did not have sex with that Ms. Lewinsky" and etc. etc. It's painful to have to believe that the would-be "public servants" you're forced to choose between are all phonies whose only real concern is their own care and feeding and who will lie so outrageously and with such a straight face that you know they have to believe you're an idiot. So who wouldn't yawn and turn away, trade apathy and cynicism for the hurt of getting treated with contempt? And who wouldn't fall all over themselves for a top politician who actually seemed to talk to you like you were a person, an intelligent adult worthy of respect? A politician who all of a sudden out of nowhere comes on TV as this total longshot candidate and says that Washington is paralyzed, that everybody there's been bought off, and that the only way to really "return government to the people" the way all the other candidates claim they want to do is to outlaw huge, unreported political contributions from corporations and lobbies and PACs . . . all of which are obvious truths that everybody knows but no recent politician anywhere's had the stones to say. Who wouldn't cheer, hearing stuff like this, especially from a guy we know chose to sit in a dark box for four years instead of violate a Code? Even in A.D. 2000, who among us is so cynical that he doesn't have some good old corny American hope way down deep in his heart, lying dormant like a spinster's ardor, not dead but just waiting for the Right Guy to give it to? That John S. McCain III opposed making Martin Luther King's birthday a holiday in AZ, or that he thinks clear-cut logging is good for America, or that he feels our present gun laws are not clinically insane—this stuff counts for nothing with these Town Hall crowds, all on their feet, cheering their own ability to finally really fucking *cheer* .

And are these crowds all stupid, or naïve, or all over 40? Look again. And if you still think Young Voters as a generation have lost the ability (or transcended the need) to believe in a politician, take a good look at *Time* magazine's shots of the South Carolina Rave, or at the wire photos of Young NH Voters on the night McCain won there. Then look at the photos of McCain's own face that night. He's the only one not smiling. Why? Can you guess? Yes: it's because now he might possibly win. At the start, on PBS and C-SPAN, in his shitty little campaign van with just his wife and a couple aides, he was running about 3% in the polls. And it's easy (or at least comparatively easy) to tell the truth when there's nothing to lose. New Hampshire changed everything. The 7 Feb. issues of all three big newsmagazines have good shots of McCain's face right at the moment the NH results are being announced. It's worth looking hard at his eyes in these photos. Now there's something to lose, or to win. Now it gets complicated, the campaign and the chances and the strategy; and complication is dangerous, because the truth is rarely complicated. Complication usually has more to do with mixed motives, gray areas, compromise. On the news, the first ominous rumble of the new complication was McCain bobbing and weaving around questions about South Carolina's Confederate flag. That was a couple days ago. Now everybody's watching. Don't think the Trail's press have nothing at stake in this. There are two big questions about McCain now, today, as everyone starts the two-week slog through SC. The easy question, the one all the pencils and heads spend their time on, is whether he'll win. The other—the one posed by those photos' eyes—is hard to even put into words.

## **NEGATIVITY**

7to 13 February is pitched to *Rolling Stone* as a "down week" on the GOP Trail, an interval almost breathtaking in its political unsexiness. Last week was the NH shocker; next week is the mad dash to SC's 19 Feb. primary, which the Twelve Monkeys all believe could now make or break both McCain and the Shrub. This week is the trenches: flesh-pressing, fundraising, traveling, poll-taking, strategizing, grinding out eight-event days in Michigan and Georgia and New York and SC.

...  
... Until that very day's big tactical shift, which catches the McCain press corps unawares and gets all sorts of stuff underway for midweek's dramatic tactical climax, the Chris Duren Incident, all of which is politically sexy and exciting as hell, though not quite in the kind of way you cheer for.

... [Author and network techs are hanging outside of the hotel, smoking] The Shrub apparently stays in five-star places with putting greens and spurting-nymph fountains and a speed-dial number for the in-house masseur. Not McCain2000, which favors Marriott, Courtyard by Marriott, Hampton Inn, Hilton, Signature Inn, Radisson, Holiday Inn, Embassy Suites. *Rolling Stone*, who is in no way cut out to be a road journalist, invokes the soul-killing anonymity of chain hotels, the rooms' terrible transient sameness: the ubiquitous floral design of the

bedspreads, the multiple low-watt lamps, the pallid artwork bolted to the wall, the schizoid whisper of ventilation, the sad shag carpet, the smell of alien cleansers, the Kleenex dispensed from the wall, the automated wakeup call, the lightproof curtains, the windows that do not open—ever. The same TV with the same cable with the same voice saying Welcome To \_\_\_\_\_ on its Channel 1's eight-second loop. The sense that everything's been touched by a thousand hands before. The sounds of others' plumbing. *RS* asks whether it's any wonder that over half of all U.S. suicides take place in chain hotels. Jim and Frank say they get the idea. Frank raises a ski glove in farewell as the young men at the bus give up and withdraw. *RS* references the chain hotel's central paradox: the form of hospitality with none of the feeling—cleanliness becomes sterility, the politeness of the staff a vague rebuke. The terrible oxymoron of "hotel *guest* ." Hell could easily be a chain hotel. Is it any coincidence that McCain's POW prison was known as the Hanoi *Hilton* ? Jim shrugs; Frank says you get used to it, that it's better not to dwell. Network camera and sound techs earn incredible overtime for staying in the field with a campaign over long periods. Frank C. has been with McCain2000 w/o break since early January and won't rotate out until Easter; the money will finance three months off during which he'll engineer Indie records and sleep til eleven and not think once of hotels or scrums or the weird way your kidneys hurt after jouncing all day on a bus.

Monday, the first and only File & Feed in Michigan, is also the day of *Rolling Stone*'s introduction to the Cellular Waltz, one of the most striking natural formations of the Trail. [...] half a dozen different members of the F&F Room's press, each fifty feet away from any of the others, for privacy, and all walking in idle counterclockwise circles with a cellphone to their ear. These little orbits are the Cellular Waltz, which is probably the digital equivalent of doodling or picking at yourself as you talk on a regular landline. There's something oddly lovely about the Waltz's different circles here, which are of various diameters and stride-lengths and rates of rotation but are all identically counterclockwise and telephonic. We three slow down a bit to watch; you couldn't not. From above—like if there were a mezzanine—the Waltzes would look like the cogs of some strange diffuse machine. Frank C. says he can tell by their faces something's up. Jim C., who's got his elderberry in one hand and cough syrup in the other, says what's interesting is that media south of the equator do the exact same Cellular Waltz but that down there all the circles are reversed.

It turns out Frank C. was right as usual, that the reason press were dashing out and Waltzing urgently in the lobby is that sometime during our OTS word had apparently started to spread in the F&F Room that Mr. Mike Murphy of the McCain2000 High Command was coming down to do a surprise impromptu -Avail regarding a fresh two-page Press Release (still slightly warm from the Xerox) which Travis and Todd are passing out now.

This document is unusual not only because McCain2000's Press Releases are normally studies in bland irrelevance—"McCAIN TO CONTINUE CAMPAIGNING IN MICHIGAN TODAY"; "McCAIN HAS TWO HELPINGS OF POTATO SALAD AT SOUTH CAROLINA VFW PICNIC"—but because no less a personage than Mike Murphy has indeed now just come down to Spin this abrupt change of tone in the campaign's rhetoric. Murphy, who is only 37 but seems older, is the McCain campaign's Senior Strategist, a professional political consultant who's already had eighteen winning Senate and gubernatorial campaigns and is as previously mentioned a constant and acerbic presence in McCain's press salon aboard the Express. [...] Among political pros, he has the reputation of being (1) smart and funny as hell and (2) a real attack-dog, working for clients like Oliver North, New Jersey's Christine Todd Whitman, and Michigan's own John Engler in campaigns that were absolute operas of nastiness, and known for turning out what the *NY Times* delicately called "some of the most rough-edged commercials in the business." He's leaning back against the F&F Room's wall in that way where you have your hands behind your lower back and sort of bounce forward and back on the hands, wearing exactly what he'll wear all week—viz. yellow twill trousers and brown Clark Wallabies and an ancient and very cool-looking leather jacket—and surrounded in a 180° arc by the Twelve Monkeys, all of whom have steno notebooks or tiny professional tape recorders out and keep clearing their throats and pushing their glasses up with excitement.

Murphy says he's "just swung by" to provide the press corps with "some context" on the strident Press Release and to give the corps advance notice that the McCain campaign is also preparing a special "response ad" which will start airing in South Carolina tomorrow. Murphy uses the words "response" or "response ad" nine times in two minutes, and when one of the Twelve Monkeys interrupts to ask whether it'd be fair to characterize this new ad as Negative, Murphy gives him a long styptic look and spells "*r-e-s-p-o-n-s-e*" out very slowly. Where he's leaning and bouncing against is the part of the wall between the F&F door and the little

round table still piled with uneaten sandwiches (to which the hour has not been kind), and the Twelve Monkeys and some field producers and lesser pencils form a perfect half-scrum around him, with various press joining the back or peeling away to go out and Cell-Waltz these new developments in to HQ.

Mike Murphy tells the hemispheric scrum that the Press Release and new ad reflect the McCain2000 campaign's decision, after much agonizing, to respond to what he says is G. W. Bush's welshing on the two candidates' public handshake-agreement in January to run a bilaterally positive campaign. For the past five days, mostly in New York and SC, the Shrub has apparently been running ads that characterize McCain's policy proposals in what Murphy terms a "willfully distorting" way. Plus there's the push-polling (see P. Release *supra*), a practice that is regarded as the absolute bottom-feeder of sleazy campaign tactics (Rep. Lindsey Graham, introducing McCain at tomorrow's THMs, will describe push-polling to South Carolina audiences as "the crack cocaine of modern politics"). But the worst, the most obviously unacceptable, Murphy emphasizes, was the Shrub standing up at a podium in SC a couple days ago with a wild-eyed and apparently notorious "fringe veteran" who publicly accused John McCain of "abandoning his fellow veterans" after returning from Vietnam, which, Murphy says, without going into Senator McCain's well-documented personal bio and heroic legislative efforts on behalf of vets for nearly twenty years (Murphy's voice rises an octave here, and blotches of color appear high on his cheeks, and it's clear he's personally hurt and aggrieved, which means that either he maybe really personally likes and believes in John S. McCain III or else has the frightening ability to raise angry blotches on his cheeks at will, the way certain great actors can make themselves cry on cue) is just so clearly over the line of even minimal personal decency and honor that it pretty much *necessitates* some sort of response.

the 12M point out that in particular the "twists the truth like Clinton" part seems Negative indeed, since in '00 comparing a GOP candidate to Bill Clinton is roughly equivalent to claiming that he wears ladies' underwear while presiding over Black Masses. But Mike Murphy—part of whose job as Senior Strategist is to act as a kind of diversionary lightning rod for any tactical criticism of McCain himself—says that he, Mike Murphy, was actually the driving force behind the ad's "strong response," that he "pushed real hard" for the ad and finally got "the campaign" to agree only after "a great deal of agonizing, because Senator McCain's been very clear with you guys about wanting a campaign we can all be proud of." One thing political reporters are really good at, though, is rephrasing a query ever so slightly so that they get to keep asking the same basic question over and over when they don't get the answer they want, and after several minutes of this they finally get Murphy to bring his hands out and up in a kind of what-are-you-gonna-do and to say: "Look, I'm not going to let them go around smearing my guy for five days without retaliating," which then leads to several more minutes of niggling semantic questions about the difference between "respond" and "retaliate," at the end of which Murphy, reaching slowly over and poking at one of the table's sandwiches with clinical interest, says: "If Bush takes down his negative ads, we'll pull the response right away. Immediately. Quote me," then turning to go. "That's all I swung by to tell you." The back of his leather jacket has a spot of what's either White-Out or bird guano on it. Murphy's hard not to like, though in a very different way from his candidate. Where McCain comes off almost brutally open and direct, Murphy's demeanor is sly and cagey in a twinkly-eyed way that makes you think he's making fun of his own slyness. He can be direct, though. One of the scrum's oldest and most elite 12M calls out one last time that surely after all there aren't any guns to candidates' heads in this race, that surely Mike (the Monkeys call him Mike) would have to admit that simply refusing to "quote, 'respond'" to Bush and thereby "staying on the high road" was something McCain *could* have done; and Murphy's *dernier cri*, over his dappled shoulder, is: "You guys want a pacifist, go support Bradley."

...

For the remainder of the at least half hour before John McCain is finally ready to get back on the Express [...] to head over to Saginaw, the techs, while checking their equipment and gearing up for the scrum at the Riverfront's main doors, listen to *Rolling Stone*'s summary of the Press Release and Murphy's comments, confirm that the Shrub has indeed gone Negative (they'd heard about all this long before the Twelve Monkeys et al., because the techs and field producers are in constant touch with their colleagues on the Shrub's buses, whereas the Monkeys' Bush2000 counterparts are as aloof and niggardly about sharing info as the 12M themselves), and kill the last of the time in the Flint F&F by quietly analyzing Bush<sub>2</sub>'s Negativity and McCain's response from a tactical point of view.

Leaving aside their aforementioned coolness and esprit de corps, you should be apprised that *Rolling Stone*'s

one and only real journalistic coup this week is his happening to stumble into hanging around with these camera and sound guys. This is because network news techs—who all have worked countless campaigns, and who have neither the raging egos of journalists nor the self-interested agenda of the McCain2000 staff to muddy their perspective—turn out to be way more acute and sensible political analysts than anybody you'll read or see on TV, and their assessment of today's Negativity developments is so extraordinarily nuanced and sophisticated that only a small portion of it can be ripped off and summarized here.

Going Negative is risky. Countless polls have shown that voters find Negativity distasteful, and if a candidate is perceived as going Negative, it usually costs him. So the techs all agree that the first question is why Bush2000 started playing this card. One possible explanation is that the Shrub was so personally shocked and scared by McCain's win in New Hampshire that he's now lashing out like a spoiled child and trying to hurt McCain however he can. The techs reject this, though. Spoiled child or no, G. W. Bush is a creature of his campaign advisors, and these advisors are the best that \$70 million and the full faith and credit of the GOP Establishment can buy, and are not spoiled children but seasoned tactical pros, and if Bush2000 has gone Negative there must be solid political logic behind the move.

This logic turns out to be indeed solid, even brilliant, and the NBC, CBS, and CNN techs flesh it out while the ABC cameraman puts several emergency sandwiches in his lens bag for tonight's flight south on a campaign plane whose provisioning is notoriously inconsistent. The Shrub's attack leaves McCain with two options. If he does not retaliate, some SC voters will credit McCain for taking the high road. But it could also come off as wimpy, might compromise McCain's image as a tough, take-no-shit guy with the balls to take on the Washington kleptocracy. Not responding could also look like "appeasing aggression," which for a candidate whose background is military and who spends a lot of time talking about rebuilding the armed forces and being less of a candy-ass in foreign policy would not be good, especially in a state with a higher percentage of both vets and gun nuts than any other (which SC's got). So McCain pretty much has to strike back, the techs agree. But this is extremely dangerous, for by retaliating—which of course (despite all Murphy's artful dodging) means going Negative himself—McCain runs the risk of looking like just another ambitious, win-at-any-cost politician, when after all so much time and effort and money has gone into casting him as the 180° opposite of that. Plus an even bigger reason why McCain can't afford to let the Shrub "pull him down to his level" (this in the phrase of the CBS cameraman, a Louisianan who's quite a bit shorter than the average tech and so besides all his other equipment has to lug a little aluminum stepladder around to stand on with his camera during scrums, which decreases his mobility but is compensated for by what the other techs agree is an almost occult ability to always find the perfect place to set up his ladder and film at just the right angle for what his HQ wants—Jim C. says the tiny Southerner is "technically about as good as they come") is that if Bush then turns around and retaliates against the retaliation and so McCain then has to re-retaliate against Bush's retaliation, and so on, the whole GOP race could quickly degenerate into just the sort of boring, depressing, cynical charge-and-counter-charge contest that turns voters off and keeps them away from the polls . . . especially Young Voters, cynicism-wise, *Rolling Stone* and the underage pencil from the free Detroit weekly thing venture to point out, both now scribbling just as furiously with the techs as the 12M were with Murphy. The techs say well OK maybe but that the really important tactical point here is that John S. McCain *cannot* afford to have voters get turned off, since his whole strategy is based on exciting the people and inspiring them and pulling more voters *in*, especially those who'd stopped voting because they'd gotten so disgusted and bored with all the Negativity and bullshit of politics. In other words, *RS* and the Detroit free-weekly kid propose to the techs, it's maybe actually even in the Shrub's own political self-interest to let the GOP race get ugly and Negative and have voters get so bored and cynical and disgusted with the whole thing that they don't even bother to vote. Well no shit Sherlock H., the ABC techs in essence respond, good old Frank C. then explaining more patiently that, yes, if there's a low voter-turnout, then the majority of the people who get off their ass and *do* vote will be the Diehard Republicans, meaning the Christian Right and the party faithful, and these are the groups that vote as they're told, the ones controlled by the GOP Establishment, an Establishment that's got \$70,000,000 and 100% of its own credibility invested in the Shrub. CNN's Mark A. takes time out from doing special stretching exercises that increase bloodflow to his arms (sound techs are very arm-conscious, since positioning a boom mike correctly in a scrum requires holding 10-foot sticks and 4.7-pound boom mikes [that's 4.7 without the weasel] horizontally out from the tops of their fully extended arms for long periods [which try this with an industrial broom or extension pruner sometime if you think it's easy], with the added proviso that the heavy

mike at the end can't wobble or dip into the cameras' shot or [God forbid, and there are horror stories] clunk the candidate on the top of the head) in order to insert that this also explains why the amazingly lifelike Al Gore, over in the Democratic race, has been so relentlessly Negative and depressing in his attacks on Bill Bradley: since Gore, like the Shrub, has his party's Establishment behind him, with all its organization and money and the Diehards who'll fall into line and vote as they're told, it's in Big Al's (and his party's bosses') interest to draw as *few* voters as possible into the Democratic primaries, because the lower the overall turnout, the more the Establishment voters' ballots actually count (w/r/t which reasoning see also **WHO EVEN CARES WHO CARES**, *supra*). Which fact then in turn, the short but highly respected CBS cameraman says, helps explain why, even though our elected representatives are always wringing their hands and making concerned sounds about low voter-turnouts, nothing substantive ever gets done to make politics less ugly or depressing or to actually induce more people to vote: our elected representatives are incumbents, and low turnouts favor incumbents for the same reason soft money does.

Let's pause here one second for a quick *Rolling Stone* PSA. If you are demographically a Young Voter, it is again worth a moment of your valuable time to consider the implications of the techs' last couple points. If you are bored and disgusted by politics and don't bother to vote, you are in effect voting for the entrenched Establishments of the two major parties, who rest assured are not dumb and are keenly aware that it is in their interests to keep you disgusted and bored and cynical and to give you every possible psychological reason to stay at home doing one-hitters and watching *MTV Spring Break* on Primary Day. By all means stay home if you want, but don't bullshit yourself that you're not voting. In reality, there is *no such thing as not voting*: you either vote by voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some Diehard's vote.

...

[tech crew suiting up to cover event] the single best part of every pre-scrum technical gear-up: watching the cameramen haul their heavy \$40,000 rigs to their shoulders like rocket launchers and pull the safety strap tight under their opposite arm and ram the clips home with practiced ease, their postures canted under the camera's weight. It is Jim C.'s custom always to say "*Up, Simba*" in a fake-deep bwana voice as he hefts the camera to his right shoulder, and he and Frank C. like to do a little pantomime of the way football players will bang their helmets together to get pumped for a big game, although obviously the techs do it carefully and make sure their equipment doesn't touch or tangle cords.

But so the techs' assessment, then, is that Bush<sub>2</sub>'s going Negative is both tactically sound and politically near-brilliant, and that it forces McCain's own strategists to walk a very tight wire indeed in formulating a response. What McCain has to try to do is retaliate without losing the inspiring high-road image that won him New Hampshire. This is why Mike Murphy took valuable huddle-with-candidate time to come down to the F&F and spoonfeed the Twelve Monkeys all this stuff about Bush's attacks being so far over the line that they had no choice but to "respond." Because the McCain2000 campaign has got to Spin today's retaliation the same way nations Spin war, i.e. McCain has to make it appear that he is not being actually aggressive himself but is merely "repelling aggression." It will require enormous discipline and cunning for McCain2000 to pull this off. And tomorrow's "response ad"—in the techs' opinion as the transcript's passed around—this ad is not a promising start, discipline-and-cunning-wise, especially the "twists the truth like Clinton" line that the 12M jumped on Murphy for. This line's too mean. McCain2000 could have chosen to put together a much softer and smarter ad patiently "correcting" certain "unfortunate errors" in Bush's ads and "respectfully requesting" that the push-polling cease (with everything in quotes here being Jim C.'s suggested terms) and striking just the right high-road tone. The actual ad's "twists like Clinton" does not sound high-road; it sounds pissy, aggressive. And it will allow Bush to do a React and now say that it's *McCain* who's violated the handshake-agreement and broken the 11<sup>th</sup> Commandment (= "Thou Shalt Not Speak Ill of Another Republican," which Diehard GOPs take very seriously) and gone way over the line . . . which the techs say will of course be bullshit, but that it might be effective bullshit, and that it's McCain's aggressive ad that's giving the Shrub the opening to do it.

If it's a mistake, then, why is McCain doing it? By this time the techs are on the bus, after the hotel-exit scrum but before the Saginaw-entrance scrum, and since it's only a ten-minute ride they have their cameras down and sticks retracted but all their gear still strapped on, which forces them to sit up uncomfortably straight and wince at bumps, and in the Pimpmobile's mirrored ceiling they look even more like sci-fi combat troops on their way to some alien beachhead. The techs' basic analysis of the motivation behind "twists the truth like Clinton" is that McCain is genuinely, personally pissed off at the Shrub, and that he has taken Murphy's leash off and let

Murphy do what Murphy does best, which is gutter-fight. McCain, after all, is known for having a temper (though he's been extremely controlled in the campaign so far and never shown it in public), and Jim C. thinks that maybe the truly ingenious thing the Shrub's strategists did here was find a way to genuinely piss McCain off and make him want to go Negative even though John Weaver and the rest of the staff High Command had to have warned him that this was playing right into Bush2000's hands. This analysis suddenly reminds *Rolling Stone* of the thing in *The Godfather* where Sonny Corleone's fatal flaw is his temper, which Barzini and Tattaglia exploit by getting Carlo to beat up Connie and make Sonny so insanely angry that he drives off to kill Carlo and gets assassinated in Barzini's ambush at that tollbooth on the Richmond Parkway. Jim C., sweating freely and trying not to cough with forty pounds of gear on, says he supposes there are some similarities, and Randy van R.—the taciturn but cinephilic CNN cameraman—speculates that the Shrub's brain-trust may actually have based their whole strategy on Barzini's ingenious ploy in *The Godfather*, whereupon Frank C. observes that Bush's equivalent to slapping Connie Corleone around was standing up with the wacko vet who claimed McCain dissed his Vietnam comrades, which at first looked kind of stupid and unnecessarily nasty of Bush but from another perspective might have been sheer genius if it made McCain so angry that his desire to retaliate outweighed his political judgment. Because, Frank C. warns, this retaliation, and Bush's response to it, and McCain's response to Bush's response—this will be all that the Twelve Monkeys and the rest of the pro corps are interested in, and if McCain lets things get too ugly he won't be able to get anybody to pay attention to anything else.

It would, of course, have been just interesting as hell for *Rolling Stone* to have gotten to watch the top-level meetings at which John McCain and John Weaver and Mike Murphy and the rest of the campaign's High Command hashed all this out and decided on the Press Release and response ad, but of course strategy sessions like these are journalistically impenetrable, if for no other reason than that it is the media who are the real object and audience for whatever strategies these sessions come up with, the critics who'll decide how it plays (with Murphy's "special advance notice" in the F&F being the strategy's opening performance, as everyone in the F&F Room was aware but no one said aloud).

But it turns out to be good enough just to get to hear the techs pass the time by deconstructing today's big moves, because events of the next few days bear out their analysis pretty much 100 percent. [... tensions escalate and both political campaigns go increasingly negative] sure enough by Wednesday night focus polls are showing that South Carolina voters are finding McCain's new ad Negative and depressing, which focus polls the Shrub seizes on and crows about while meanwhile Bush2000's strategists, "in response" to McCain's "outrageous" equation of Bush<sub>2</sub> with W. J. Clinton, which "impugns [Bush's] character and deeply offends [him]," start running a new ad of their own that shows a clip of the handshake in NH and then some photo of McCain looking angry and vicious and says "John McCain shook hands and promised a clean campaign, then attacked Governor Bush with misleading ads" and then apparently just for good measure tosses in a quote from 4 Feb.'s *NBC Nightly News* that says "McCain solicited money from organizations appearing before his Senate Committee . . . and pressured agencies on behalf of his contributors," about which quote Jim C. (who, recall, works for NBC News) says the original *NBC Nightly News* report was actually just about Bush supporters' charges that McCain had done these things, and thus that the ad's quote is decontextualized in a really blatantly sleazy and misleading way, but of course by this time—Thursday 10 Feb., 0745h., proceeding in convoy formation to the day's first THMs in Spartanburg and Greenville—it doesn't matter, because there've been so many charges and deep offenses and countercharges that McCain's complaining about the deceptive quote would just be one more countercharge, which Jim C. says is surely why Bush2000 felt they could mangle the quote and get away with it, which verily they appear to have done, because SC polls have both McCain's support and the primary's projected voter-turnout falling like rocks, and the techs are having to spend all their time helping their field producers find the "fighting words" in every tape and feed them to the networks because that's all the networks want, and everyone on Bullshit 1&2 is starting to get severely dispirited and bored, and even the 12M's strides have lost a certain pigeon-toed spring . . .

. . . And then out of nowhere comes the dramatic tactical climax mentioned way above, which hits the media like a syringe of Narcan and makes all five networks' news that night. It occurs at the Spartanburg THM, whose venue is a small steep theater in the Fine Arts Center of a small college nobody ever did find out the name of . . .

In fairness to McCain, he's not an orator and doesn't pretend to be. His *métier* is conversation, back-and-forth. This is because he's bright in a fast, flexible way that most candidates aren't. He also genuinely seems to find



people and questions and arguments energizing—the latter maybe because of all his years debating in Congress—which is why he favors Town Hall Q&As and constant chats with press in his rolling salon. So, while the media marvel at his accessibility because they've been trained to equate it with vulnerability, they don't seem to realize they're playing totally to McCain's strength when they converse with him instead of listening to his speeches. In conversation he's smart and alive and human and seems actually to listen and respond directly to you instead of some demographic abstraction you might represent. It's his speeches and 22.5s that are canned and stilted, and also sometimes scary and Right-Wingish, and when you listen closely to some of them it's as if some warm pleasant fog suddenly lifts and it strikes you that you're not at all sure it's John McCain you want to be your Commander in Chief of the War on Drugs or to choose the three or four new Justices who'll probably be coming onto the Supreme Court in the next term, and you start wondering all over again what makes the guy so attractive.

But then the doubts again dissolve when McCain starts taking questions at THMs, which by now is what's underway in Spartanburg. McCain always starts this part by telling the crowd he invites "questions, comments, and the occasional insult from any U.S. Marines who might be here today" (which, again, gets radically less funny with repetition [apparently the Navy and Marines tend not to like each other]). The questions always run the great *vox populi* gamut, from Talmudically bearded guys asking about Chechnya and tort reform to high-school kids reading questions off printed sheets their hands shake as they hold, from moms worried about their babies' future SSI to ancient vets in Legion caps who call McCain "Lieutenant" and want to trade salutes, plus the obligatory walleied fundamentalists trying to pin him down on whether Christ really called homosexuality an abomination (w/ McCain, to his credit, pointing out that they don't even have the right Testament), and arcane questions about index-fund regulation and postal privatization, and HMO horror stories, and Internet porn, and tobacco litigation, and people who believe the Second Amendment entitles them to own grenade launchers. The questions are random and unscreened, and the candidate fields them all, and he's never better or more human than in these exchanges, especially when the questioner is angry or wacko—McCain will say "I respectfully disagree" or "We have a difference of opinion" and then detail his objections in lucid English with a gentleness that's never condescending. For a man with a temper, a reputation for suffering fools ungladly, McCain is unbelievably patient and decent with people at THMs, especially when you consider that he's 63, sleep-deprived, in chronic pain, and under enormous pressure not to gaffe or get himself in trouble. He doesn't. No matter how stale and Message-Disciplined the 22.5 at the beginning, in the Town Hall Q&As you get an overwhelming sense that this is a decent, honorable man trying to tell the truth to people he really sees. You will not be alone in this impression.

Among the techs and non-simian pencils, the feeling is that McCain's single finest human moment of the campaign so far was at the Warren MI Town Hall Meeting on Monday, in the Q&A, when a middle-aged man in a sportcoat and beret, a man who didn't look in any way unusual but turned out to be insane—meaning literally, as in *DSM IV*-grade schizophrenic—came to the mike and said the government of Michigan has a mind-control machine and influences brainwaves and that not even wrapping roll after roll of aluminum foil around your head with only the tiniest pinpricks for eyes and breathing stopped them from influencing brainwaves and says he wants to know if McCain is president will he use Michigan's mind-control machine to catch the murderers and pardon the Congress and compensate him personally for sixty long years of government mind-control, and can he get it in writing. The question is not funny; the room's silence is horrified. Think how easy it would have been for a candidate then to blanch or stumble, or have hard-eyed aides remove the man, or—worst—to have made fun of the guy in order to defuse everyone's horror and embarrassment and try to score humor-points with the crowd, at which most of the younger pencils would probably have fainted dead away from cynical disgust because the poor guy is still standing there at the mike and looking earnestly up at McCain, awaiting an answer. Which McCain, incredibly, *sees*—the man's humanity, the seriousness of these issues to him—and says yes, he will, he'll promise to look into it, and yes he'll put this promise in writing, although he "believe[s] [they] have a difference of opinion about this mind-control machine," and in short defuses the insane man and treats him respectfully without patronizing him or pretending to be schizophrenic too, and does it all so quickly and gracefully and with such basic decency that if it was some sort of act then McCain is the devil himself. Which the techs, later, after the post-THM Press-Avail and scrum, degearing aboard the ghastly Pimpmobile, say McCain is not (the devil) and that they were, to a man, moved by the unfakable humanity of the exchange, and yet at the same time impressed with McCain's professionalism in

disarming the guy, and Jim C. urges *Rolling Stone* not to be so cynical as to reject out of hand the possibility that the two can coexist—human genuineness and political professionalism—because it's the great yin-and-yang paradox of the McCain2000 campaign, and is so much more interesting than the sort of robotic unhuman all-pro campaign he's used to that Jim says he almost doesn't mind the grind this time.

Maybe they really can coexist. Humanity and politics, shrewdness and decency. But it gets complicated. In Spartanburg's Q&A, after two China questions and one on taxing Internet commerce, as most of the lobby's pencils are still at the glass making fun of the local heads, a totally demographically average thirty-something middle-class soccer mom in rust-colored slacks and those round, overlarge glasses totally average thirty-something soccer moms always wear gets picked and stands and somebody brings her the mike. It turns out her name is Donna Duren, of right here in Spartanburg SC, and she says she has a 14-year-old son named Chris, in whom Mr. and Mrs. Duren have been trying to inculcate family values and respect for authority and a non-cynical idealism about America and its duly elected leaders. They want him to find heroes he can believe in, she says. Donna Duren's whole story takes a while, but nobody's bored, and even on the four-faced monitor you can sense a change in the THM's theater's voltage, and the national pencils come away from the front's glass and start moving in and elbowing people aside (which they're really good at) to get close to the monitor's screens. Mrs. Duren says that Chris—clearly a sensitive kid—was “made very very upset” by the M. Lewinsky scandal and the R-rated revelations and the appalling behavior of Clinton and Starr and Tripp and pretty much everybody on all sides during the impeachment thing, and Chris had a lot of very upsetting and uncomfortable questions that Mr. and Mrs. D. struggled to answer, and that basically it was a really hard time but they got through it. And then last year, at more or less a trough in terms of idealism and respect for elected authority, she says, Chris had discovered John McCain and McCain2000.com, and got interested in the campaign, and the parents had apparently read him some G-rated parts of *Faith of My Fathers*, and the upshot is that young Chris finally found a public hero he could believe in: John S. McCain III. It's impossible to know what McCain's face is doing during this story because the monitors are taking CNN's feed and Randy van R. of CNN's lens is staying hard and steady on Donna Duren, who appears so iconically prototypical and so thoroughly exudes the special quiet dignity of an average American who knows she's average and just wants a decent, non-cynical life for herself and her family that she can say things like “family values” and “hero” without anybody rolling their eyes. But then last night, Mrs. D. says, as they were all watching some wholesome nonviolent TV in the family room, the phone suddenly rang upstairs, and Chris went up and got it, and Mrs. D. says a little while later he came back down into the family room crying and just terribly upset and told them the phone call had been a man who started talking to him about the 2000 campaign and asked Chris if he knew that John McCain was a liar and a cheater and that anybody who'd vote for John McCain was either stupid or un-American or both. That caller had been a push-poller for Bush2000, Mrs. Duren says, knuckles on her mike-hand white and voice almost breaking, distraught in a totally average and moving parental way, and she says she just wanted Senator McCain to know about it, about what happened to Chris, and wanted to know whether anything can be done to keep people like this from calling innocent young kids and plunging them into disillusionment and confusion about whether they're stupid for trying to have heroes they believe in.

At which point (0853 EST) two things happen out here in the Fine Arts lobby. The first is that the national pencils disperse in a radial pattern, each dialing his cellphone, and the network field producers all come barreling out of the theater doors pulling their cellphone antennas out with their teeth, and everybody tries to find an empty 4-ft<sup>2</sup> to Waltz in while they call the gist of this riveting Negativity-related development in to networks and editors and try to raise their counterparts in the Bush2000 press corps to see if they can get a React from the Shrub on Mrs. Duren's story, at the end of which story the second thing happens, which is that CNN's Randy van R. finally pans to McCain and you can see McCain's facial expression, which is pained and pale and looks actually more distraught even than Mrs. Duren's face had looked. And what McCain does, after looking silently at the floor a second, is: apologize. He doesn't lash out at Bush<sub>2</sub> or at push-polling or appear to try to capitalize politically in any way. He looks sad and compassionate and regretful and says that the only reason he got into this race in the first place was to try to help inspire young Americans to feel better about devoting themselves to something, and that a story like what Mrs. Duren took the trouble to come down here to the THM this morning and tell him is just about the worst thing he could hear, and that if it's OK with Mrs. D. he'd like to call her son—he asks his name again, and Randy van R. pans smoothly back to Donna Duren as she says “Chris” and then pans back to McCain—Chris and apologize personally on the phone and tell Chris that

yes there are unfortunately some bad people out there and he's sorry Chris had to hear stuff like what he heard but that it's never a mistake to believe in something, that politics is still worthwhile as a Process to get involved in, and he really does look upset, McCain does, and almost as what seems like an afterthought he says that maybe one thing Donna Duren and other concerned parents and citizens can do is call the Bush2000 campaign and tell them to stop this push-polling, that Governor Bush is a good man with a family of his own and it's difficult to believe he'd ever endorse his campaign doing things like this if he knew about it, and that he (McCain) will be calling Governor Bush again personally for the umpteenth time to ask him to stop the Negativity, and McCain's eyes look . . . *wet* , as in teary, which maybe is just a trick of the TV lights but is nevertheless disturbing, the whole thing is disturbing, because McCain seems upset in a way that's a little too, well, almost *dramatic* . He takes a couple more THM questions, then stops abruptly and says he's sorry but he's just so upset about the Chris Duren thing that he's having a hard time concentrating on anything else, and he asks the THM crowd's forgiveness, and thanks them, and forgets his Message-Discipline and doesn't finish with he'll always. Tell them. The truth but they applaud like mad anyway, and the four-faced monitor's feed is cut as Randy and Jim C. et al. go shoulder-held to join the scrum as McCain starts to exit.

And now none of this is simple at all, especially McCain's almost exaggerated-seeming distress about Chris Duren, which really did seem a little much, and a small set of very disturbing and possibly cynical interconnected thoughts and questions start whirling around in the journalistic head. Like the fact that Donna Duren's story was a far, far more devastating indictment of the Shrub's campaign tactics than anything McCain himself could say, and is it possible that McCain, on the theater's stage, wasn't aware of this? Is it possible that he didn't see all the TV field producers shouldering their way through the aisles' crowds with their cellphones and know instantly that Mrs. Duren's story and his reaction were going to get big network play and make Bush2000 look bad? Is it possible that some part of McCain could realize this—that what happened to Chris Duren is very much to McCain's political advantage—and yet he's still such a decent, uncalculating guy that all he feels is horror and regret that a kid was disillusioned? Was it human compassion that made him apologize first instead of criticizing Bush2000, or is McCain just maybe shrewd enough to know that Mrs. D.'s story had already nailed Bush to the wall and that by apologizing and looking distraught McCain could help underscore the difference between his own human decency and Bush's uncaring Negativity? Is it possible that he really had tears in his eyes? Is it—ulp—possible that he somehow *made* himself get tears in his eyes because he knew what a decent, caring, non-Negative guy it would make him look like? And come to think of it hey, why would a push-poller even be interested in trying to push-poll someone who's too young to vote? Does Chris Duren maybe have a really deep-sounding phone voice or something? But wouldn't you think a push-poller'd ask somebody's age before launching into his spiel? And how come nobody asked this question, not even the jaded 12M out in the lobby? What could they have been thinking? [...]none of the usual media pros are available for *RS* to interface with and help deconstruct the Chris Duren Incident and help try to figure out what to be cynical about and what not to and which of the many disturbing questions the whole Incident provokes are paranoid or irrelevant and which ones might be humanly and/or journalistically valid . . . such as was McCain really serious about calling Chris Duren? How was he going to get the Durens' phone number when Mrs. D. was scrummed solid the whole time he and the staff were leaving? Do they plan to just look in the phonebook or something? And where were Mike Murphy and John Weaver through that whole thing, who can usually be seen Cell-Waltzing in the back at every THM but today were nowhere in sight? And is Murphy maybe even now in the Express's salon in his red chair next to McCain, leaning in toward the candidate's ear and whispering very calmly and coolly about the political advantages of what just happened and various tasteful but effective ways they can capitalize on it and use it to escape the tactical box that Bush<sub>2</sub>'s going Negative put them in in the first place? What's McCain's reaction if that's what Murphy's doing—like, is he listening, or is he still too upset to listen, or is he somehow both? Is it just possible that McCain—maybe not even consciously—played up his reaction to Mrs. Duren's story and framed his distress to give himself a plausible, good-looking excuse to get out of the Negative spiral that's been hurting him so badly in the polls that Jim and Frank say he may well lose SC if things keep on this way? Is it too cynical even to consider such a thing?

Because at the following day's first Press-Avail, John S. McCain III issues a plausible, good-looking, highly emotional statement to the whole scrummed corps. This is on the warm, pretty morning of 11 February outside the Embassy Suites (or maybe Hampton Inn) in Charleston, right after Baggage Call. McCain informs the press that the case of young Chris Duren has caused him such distress that after a great deal of late-night soul-

searching he's now ordered his staff to cease all Negativity and to pull all the McCain2000 response ads in South Carolina regardless of whether the Shrub pulls his own Negative ads or not.

And, framed as it now is in the distressed context of the Chris Duren Incident, McCain's decision now in no way makes him look wimpy or appeasing, but rather like a truly decent, honorable, high-road guy who doesn't want young people's political idealism fucked with in any way if he can help it. It's a stirring and high-impact statement, and a masterful -Avail, and everybody in the scrum seems impressed and in some cases deeply and personally moved, and nobody (including *Rolling Stone*) ventures to point out aloud that, however unfortunate the phone call was for the Durens, it turned out to be just fortunate as *hell* for John S. McCain and McCain2000 in terms of this week's tactical battle, that actually the whole thing couldn't have worked out better for McCain2000 if it had been . . . well, like *scripted*, if like say Mrs. Donna Duren had been a trained actress or gifted amateur who'd been somehow secretly approached and rehearsed and paid and planted in that crowd of over 300 random unscreened questioners where her raised hand in that sea of average voters' hands was seen and chosen and she got to tell a moving story that made all five networks last night and damaged Bush<sub>2</sub>badly and now has released McCain from this week's tactical box. Any way you look at it (and there's a nice long DT during which to look at it), yesterday's Incident and THM were an almost incredible stroke of political luck for McCain, or else maybe a stroke of something else that no one—not the Twelve Monkeys, not Alison Mitchell or the marvelously cynical Australian *Globe* lady or even the totally sharp and unsentimental and astute Jim C.—ever once broaches or mentions out loud, which might be understandable, since maybe even considering whether it was just *even possible* would be so painful it would break your heart and make it hard to go on, which is what the press and staff and Straight Talk caravan and McCain himself have to do all day, and the next, and the next—go on.

## SUCK IT UP

**Another** paradox: it is just about impossible to talk about the really important stuff in politics without using terms that have become such awful clichés they make your eyes glaze over and are hard to even hear. One such term is “leader,” which all the big candidates use all the time—as in e.g. “providing leadership,” “a proven leader,” “a new leader for a new century,” etc.—and have reduced to such a platitude that it's hard to try to think about what “leader” really means and whether indeed what today's Young Voters want is a leader. The weird thing is that the word “leader” itself is cliché and boring, but when you come across somebody who actually is a real leader, that person isn't cliché or boring at all; in fact he's sort of the *opposite* of cliché and boring.

Obviously, a real leader isn't just somebody who has ideas you agree with, nor is it just somebody you happen to believe is a good guy. Think about it. A real leader is somebody who, because of his own particular power and charisma and example, is able to inspire people, with “inspire” being used here in a serious and non-cliché way. A real leader can somehow get us to do certain things that deep down we think are good and want to be able to do but usually can't get ourselves to do on our own. It's a mysterious quality, hard to define, but we always know it when we see it, even as kids. You can probably remember seeing it in certain really great coaches, or teachers, or some extremely cool older kid you “looked up to” (interesting phrase) and wanted to be just like. Some of us remember seeing the quality as kids in a minister or rabbi, or a scoutmaster, or a parent, or a friend's parent, or a supervisor in a summer job. And yes, all these are “authority figures,” but it's a special kind of authority. If you've ever spent time in the military, you know how incredibly easy it is to tell which of your superiors are real leaders and which aren't, and how little rank has to do with it. A leader's real “authority” is a power you voluntarily give him, and you grant him this authority not with resentment or resignation but happily; it feels right. Deep down, you almost always like how a real leader makes you feel, the way you find yourself working harder and pushing yourself and thinking in ways you couldn't ever get to on your own.

In other words—and you have to suck it up and just ignore the clichés here for a second, because these aren't just words, and there's important stuff in back of them—in other words, a real leader is somebody who can help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better things than we can get ourselves to do on our own. Lincoln was, by all available evidence, a real leader, and Churchill, and Gandhi, and King. Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt, and de Gaulle, and certainly

Marshall and maybe Eisenhower. (Of course Hitler was a real leader too, a very powerful one, so you have to watch out; all it is is a weird kind of power.)

Probably the last real leader we had as U.S. president was JFK, 40 years ago. It's not that Kennedy was a better human being than the seven presidents we've had since: we know he lied about his WWII record, and had spooky Mob ties, and screwed around more in the White House than poor old Clinton could ever dream of. But JFK had that weird leader-type magic, and when he said things like "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" nobody rolled their eyes or saw it as just a clever line. Instead, a lot of them felt inspired. And the decade that followed, however fucked up it was in other ways, saw millions of Young Voters devote themselves to social and political causes that had nothing to do with getting a good job or owning nice stuff or finding the best parties; and the 60s were, by most accounts, a generally cleaner and happier time than now.

It's worth considering why. It's worth thinking about why, when John McCain says he wants to be president in order to inspire a generation of young Americans to devote themselves to causes greater than their own self-interest (which means he's saying he wants to be a real leader), a great many of those young Americans will yawn or roll their eyes or make some ironic joke instead of feeling totally inspired the way they did with Kennedy. True, JFK's audience was more "innocent" than we are: Vietnam hadn't happened yet, or Watergate, or the S&L scandal, etc. But there's also something else. The science of sales and marketing was still in its drooling infancy in 1961 when Kennedy was saying "Ask not . . ." The young people he inspired had not been skillfully marketed to all their lives. They knew nothing of Spin. They were not totally, terribly familiar with salesmen.

Now you have to pay extra-close attention to something that's going to seem obvious at first. There is a difference between a great leader and a great salesman. Of course there are also similarities. A great salesman is usually charismatic and likable and can often get us to do things (buy things, agree to things) we might not on our own, and sometimes to feel truly good about it. Plus a lot of salesmen are decent guys with plenty about them to admire. But even a truly great salesman isn't a leader. Because a salesman's ultimate, overriding motivation is: self-interest. If you buy what he's selling, the salesman profits. So even though the salesman may have a very powerful, charismatic, admirable personality and might even persuade you that buying really is in your interest (and it really might be)—still, a little part of you always knows that what the salesman's ultimately after is something for himself. And this awareness is painful . . . although admittedly it's a tiny pain, more like a twinge, and often unconscious. But if you're subjected to enough great salesmen and salespitches and marketing concepts for long enough—like from your earliest Saturday-morning cartoons, let's say—it is only a matter of time before you start believing deep down that everything is sales and marketing, and that whenever somebody seems like they care about you or about some noble idea or cause, that person is really a salesman and really ultimately doesn't give a shit about you or some cause but really just wants something for himself.

Some people believed that Ronald W. Reagan (1981–88) was our last real leader. But not many of them were Young Voters. Even in the 80s, most younger Americans, who could smell a marketer a mile away, knew that what Reagan really was was a great salesman. What he was selling, of course, was the idea of himself as a leader. And if you're under, say, 40, this is what pretty much every U.S. president you've grown up with has been: a very talented salesman, surrounded by smart, expensive political strategists and media consultants and Spinmasters who manage his "campaign" (as in also "advertising campaign") and help him sell us on the idea that it's in our interests to vote for him. But the real interests that drove these guys were their own. They wanted, above all, To Be The President, wanted the mind-bending power and prominence, the historical immortality—you could smell it on them. (Young Voters tend to have an especially good sense of smell for this sort of thing.) And this is why these guys weren't real leaders: because their deepest, most elemental motives were selfish, there was no chance of them ever inspiring us to transcend our *own* selfishness. Instead, they helped reinforce our market-conditioned belief that everybody's ultimately out for himself and that life is about selling and profit and that words and phrases like "service" and "justice" and "community" and "patriotism" and "duty" and "Give government back to the people" and "I feel your pain" and "Compassionate Conservatism" are just the politics industry's proven salespitches, exactly the same way "Anti-Tartar" and "Fresher Breath" and "Four Out of Five Dentists Surveyed Recommend" are the toothpaste industry's pitches. We may vote for them, the same way we may go buy toothpaste. But we're not inspired. They're not the real thing.

It's not just a matter of lying or not lying, either. Everyone knows that the best marketing often tells the truth—sometimes the toothpaste really *is* better. That's not the point. The point, leader-wise, is the difference between believing somebody and believing *in* him.

Yes, this is simplistic. All politicians sell, always have. FDR and JFK and MLK and Gandhi were great salesmen. But that's not all they were. People could smell it. That weird little extra something. It had to do with "character" (which, yes, is also a cliché—suck it up).

All of this is why watching John McCain hold Press Conferences and -Avals and Town Hall Meetings (we're all at the North Charleston THM right now, 0820h. on Wednesday 9 Feb., in the horrible lobby of something called the Carolina Ice Palace) and be all conspicuously honest and open and informal and idealistic and no-bullshit and say "I run for president not to Be Somebody, but to Do Something" and "We're on a national crusade to give government back to the people" in front of these cheering crowds just seems so much more goddamn *complicated* than watching old b/w clips of John Kennedy's speeches. It feels impossible, in February '00, to tell whether John McCain is a real leader or merely a very talented political salesman, just another entrepreneur who's seen a new market-niche and devised a way to fill it.

Because here's another paradox: Spring 2000—mid-morning in America's hangover from the whole Lewinsky-and-impeachment thing—represents a moment of almost unprecedented cynicism and disgust with national politics, a moment when blunt, I-don't-give-a-shit-if-you-elect-me honesty becomes an incredibly attractive and salable and *electable* commodity. A moment when an anticandidate can be a real candidate. But of course if he becomes a real candidate, is he still an anticandidate? Can you sell someone's refusal to be for sale?

There are many elements of the McCain2000 campaign—naming the bus "Straight Talk," the timely publication of *Faith of My Fathers*, the much-hyped "openness" and "spontaneity" of the Express's media salon, the Message-Disciplined way McCain thumps "Always. Tell you. The truth."—that indicate some very shrewd, clever marketers are trying to market this candidate's rejection of shrewd, clever marketing. Is this bad? It's sure confusing. Suppose, let's say, you've got a candidate who says polls are bullshit and that he refuses to tailor his campaign-style to polls, and suppose then that new polls start showing that people really like this candidate's polls-are-bullshit stance and are thinking about voting for him because of it, and suppose the candidate reads these polls (who wouldn't?) and then starts saying even more loudly and often that polls are bullshit and that he won't use them to decide what to say, maybe even turning "polls are bullshit" into a campaign slogan and being Message-Disciplined about repeating it in every speech and even painting *Polls Are Bullshit* on the side of his bus, etc. Is he a hypocrite? Is it hypocritical that one of McCain's ads' lines in South Carolina is "telling the truth even when it hurts him politically," which of course since it's an ad means that McCain's trying to get political benefit out of his indifference to political benefit? What's the difference between hypocrisy and paradox?

Non-simple enough for you now? Because if you're a true-blue, market-savvy Young Voter, the only certainty you're going to feel about John McCain's campaign is that it produces a modern and very American sort of confusion, a sort of interior war between your deep need to believe and your deep belief that the need to believe is bullshit, that's there's nothing left anywhere but salesmen. At the times your cynicism's winning, you'll find it's possible to see even McCain's most attractive qualities as just clever marketing. His famous habit of bringing up his own closet's skeletons, for example—bad grades, messy divorce, indictment as one of the Keating Five—this could be real honesty and openness, or it could just be McCain's canny way of preempting criticism by criticizing himself before anyone else gets the chance. The humble way he talks about his heroism as a POW—"It doesn't take much talent to get shot down"; "I wasn't a hero, but I was fortunate enough to serve my time in the company of heroes"—this could be real humility, or it could be McCain's clever way of appearing both heroic *and* humble. You can run this weird sort of two-way interpretation on almost everything about him . . . even the incredible daily stamina he shows on the Trail—this could be a function of McCain's native energy and enjoyment of people, or it could be ambition, a hunger for election so great that it drives him past sane human limits. Because holy shit. The good old Shrub stays at luxury hotels like the Charleston Inn and travels with his own personal pillow and likes to sleep til nine; McCain crashes at hellish chain places and drinks pop out of cans and moves like only methedrine can make a normal person move. Last night the Straight Talk caravan didn't get back to the Embassy Suites until 2340, and McCain was reportedly up with Murphy and Weaver planning ways to respond to Bush<sub>2</sub>'s response to the Negative ad McCain's running

in response to Bush<sub>2</sub>'s new Negative ad for three hours after that, and you know getting up and showering and shaving and putting on a nice suit has to take some time if you're a guy who can't raise his arms past his shoulders, plus he had to eat breakfast, and the S.T. Express hauled out this morning at 0738h., and now here McCain is at 0822 almost running back and forth on the raised stage in a Carolina Ice Palace lobby so off-the-charts hideous that the press all pass up the free pastry. (The lobby's lined with red and blue rubber—yes, rubber—and 20 feet up a green iron spiral staircase is an open mezzanine with fencing of mustard-colored pipe from which hang long purple banners for the Lowcountry Youth Hockey Association, and you can hear the rink's organ someplace inside and a symphony of twitters and boings from an enormous video arcade just down the bright-orange hall, and on either side of the THM stage are huge monitors composed of nine identical screens arrayed 3 x 3, and the monitor on the left has nine identical McCain faces talking but the one on the right has just one big McCain face cut into nine separate squares, and every ft<sup>2</sup> of the nauseous lobby is occupied by wildly supportive South Carolinians, and it's 95° at least, and the whole thing is so sensuously assaultive that all the media except Jim C. and the techs turn around and listen facing away, most drinking more than one cup of coffee at once). And even on four hours' sleep at the very outside now McCain on the stage is undergoing the same metamorphosis that happens whenever the crowd is responsive and laughs at his jokes and puts down coffee and kids to applaud when he says that he'll Beat Al Gore Like A Drum. In person, McCain is not a sleek gorgeous telegenic presence like Rep. Mark Sanford or the Shrub. McCain is short and slight and stiff in a slightly twisted way. He tends to look a little sunken in his suit. His voice is a thin second tenor and not hypnotic or stirring per se. But onstage, taking questions and pacing like something caged, his body seems to tumesce, and his voice takes on a resonance, and unlike the Shrub he is bodyguardless and the stage wide open and the questions unscreened and he answers them well, and the best Town Meetings' crowds' eyes brighten, and unlike Gore's dead bird's eyes or the Shrub's narrow glare McCain's eyes are wide and candid and full of a very attractive inspiring light that's either devotion to causes beyond him or a demagogue's love of the crowds' love or an insatiable hunger to become the most powerful white male on earth. Or all three.

The point, to put it as simply and dully as possible, is that there's a very real tension between what John McCain's appeal is and the way that appeal must be structured and packaged in order to get him elected. To get you to buy. And the media—which is, after all, the box in which John McCain is brought to you, and for the most part is your only access to him, and which itself is composed of individual people, voters, some of them Young—sees this tension, feels it, especially the McCain2000 corps. Don't think they don't. And don't forget they're human, or that the way they're going to resolve this tension and decide how to see McCain (and so let you see McCain) will depend way less on political ideology than on each reporter's own interior wars between cynicism and idealism and marketing and leadership. The far-Right *National Review*, for example, calls McCain "a crook and a showboat," while the Old-Left *New York Review of Books* says "McCain isn't the anti-Clinton . . . McCain is more like the unClinton, in the way 7Up was the unCola: different flavor, same sugar content," and the politically indifferent *Vanity Fair* quotes Washington insiders of unknown affiliation whispering "People should never underestimate [McCain's] shrewdness. His positions, in many instances, are very calculated in terms of media appeal."

Well no duh. Here in SC, the single most depressing and cynical episode of the whole week involves shrewd, calculated appeal. (At least in certain moods it looks like it does [maybe]). Recall 10 February's Chris Duren Incident in Spartanburg and McCain's enormous distress and his promise to phone and apologize personally to the disillusioned kid. So the next afternoon, at a pre-F&F Press-Avail back in North Charleston, the new, unilaterally non-Negative McCain informs the press corps that he's going up to his hotel room right now to call Chris Duren. The phone call is to be "a private one between this young man and me," McCain says. Then Todd the Press Liaison steps in looking very stern and announces that only network techs will be allowed in the room, and while they can film the whole call, only the first ten seconds of audio will be permitted. "Ten seconds, then we kill the sound," Todd says, looking hard at Frank C. and the other audio guys. "This is a private call, not a media event." Now think about this. If it's a "private call," why let TV cameras film McCain making it? And why only ten seconds of sound? Why not either sound or no sound?

The answer is modern and American and shrewd and pretty much right out of Marketing 101. The campaign wants to publicize McCain keeping his promise and calling a traumatized kid, but also to publicize the fact that McCain is calling him "privately" and not just exploiting Chris Duren for crass political purposes. There's no other possible reason for the ten-second audio cut-off, which cut-off will of course require networks that run the

film to explain why there's no sound after the initial Hello, which of course will make McCain look doubly good, both caring and nonpolitical. Does the shrewd calculation of appeal here imply that McCain doesn't really care about Chris, doesn't really want to buck him up and restore the kid's faith in the Political Process? Not necessarily. But what it does mean is that McCain2000 wants to have it both ways, rather like big corporations who give to charity and then try to reap PR benefits by hyping their altruism in their ads. Does stuff like this mean the gifts and phone call aren't "good"? The answer depends on how gray-area-tolerant you are about sincerity vs. marketing, or sincerity + marketing, or leadership + the packaging and selling of same.

But if you, like poor old *Rolling Stone*'s nonprofessional, have come to a point on the Trail where you've started fearing your own cynicism every bit as much as you fear your credulity and the salesmen who feed on it, you're apt to find your thoughts returning again and again to a certain dark and box-sized cell in a certain Hilton half a world and three careers away, to the torture and fear and offer of reprieve and a certain Young Voter named McCain's refusal to violate a Code. There were no techs' cameras in that box, no aides or consultants, no paradoxes or gray areas; nothing to sell. There was just one guy and whatever in his character sustained him. This is a huge deal. In your mind, that Hoa Lo box becomes sort of a dressing room with a star on the door, the private place behind the stage where one imagines "the real John McCain" still lives. And but now the paradox here is that this box that makes McCain "real" is: impenetrable. Nobody gets in or out. That's why, however many behind-the-scenes pencils get put on the case, be apprised that a "profile" of John McCain is going to be just that: one side, exterior, split and diffracted by so many lenses there's way more than one man to see. Salesman or leader or neither or both: the final paradox—the really tiny central one, way down deep inside all the other campaign puzzles' spinning cubes and squares and boxes that layer McCain—is that whether he's "for real" depends now less on what's in his heart than on what might be in yours. Try to stay awake.