

THE PUBLIC EDITOR

What That McCain Article Didn't Say

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The McCain Article

Editors and reporters who worked on *The Times's* recent article about Senator John McCain answered questions from readers.

The Long Run: For McCain, Self-Confidence on Ethics Poses Its Own Risk (February 21, 2008)

BILL KELLER, the executive editor of *The Times*, said the article about John McCain that appeared in Thursday's paper was about a man nearly felled by scandal who rebuilt himself as a fighter against corruption but is still "careless about appearances, careless about his reputation, and that's a pretty important thing to know about somebody who wants to be president of the United States."

But judging by the explosive reaction to the 3,000-word article, most readers saw it as something else altogether. They saw it as a story about illicit sex. And most were furious at *The Times*.

Marilyn Monaco of Philadelphia, one of more than 2,400 readers to comment on *The Times's* Web site, said the newspaper "has sunk below its standards and created a salacious distraction from an otherwise substantive campaign. And for the record, I am an Obama supporter." Terry Bledsoe of Sun Lakes, Ariz., said, "I am most disappointed in *The New York Times* for engaging in this sort of trash-the-candidate journalism." A minority of readers applauded the article. "Bravo to *The Times* for integrity and guts," said Rick Gore of Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

The uproar was over an assertion in the second paragraph that during McCain's first run for the White House eight years ago, some of his top advisers became "convinced" he was having a "romantic" relationship with a female lobbyist and intervened to protect the candidate from himself. McCain, 71, and the lobbyist, Vicki Iseman, 40, denied they had an affair, and at a press conference after the article was published, McCain denied that anyone ever confronted him about their relationship. He described her as a friend.

The article had repercussions for both McCain and *The Times*. He may benefit, at least in the short run, from a conservative backlash against the "liberal" *New York Times*. The newspaper found itself in the uncomfortable position of being the story as much as publishing the story, in large part because, although it raised one of the most toxic subjects in politics — sex — it offered readers no proof that McCain and Iseman had a romance.

In a follow-up article on Friday, the newspaper even seemed to play down its role in the sex angle. It described the previous day's article as talking about McCain's "ties" to Iseman and his "association" with her. The only mention of romance came in quoting a question to McCain at his press conference.

Boiled to the essentials, this is what *The Times* reported Thursday: In 1999, Iseman, a lobbyist for telecommunications companies with business before a Senate committee led by McCain, started turning up at his fund-raisers, visiting his offices and accompanying him on a corporate jet. "Convinced the relationship had become romantic" and was putting his campaign and career at risk, some top McCain advisers gave instructions to block her access, privately warned her away and repeatedly confronted him.

Two former McCain associates, who were quoted anonymously and described as "disillusioned" with the senator, said he "acknowledged behaving inappropriately and pledged to keep his distance from Ms. Iseman." John Weaver, a former top strategist for McCain, told The Times he had arranged a meeting at Union Station in Washington in which Iseman was asked to stay away from the senator. Weaver said the message of McCain's 2000 presidential campaign was "taking on the special interests" and Iseman's presence could undermine that.

The article was notable for what it did not say: It did not say what convinced the advisers that there was a romance. It did not make clear what McCain was admitting when he acknowledged behaving inappropriately — an affair or just an association with a lobbyist that could look bad. And it did not say whether Weaver, the only on-the-record source, believed there was a romance. The Times did not offer independent proof, like the text messages between Detroit's mayor and a female aide that The Detroit Free Press disclosed recently, or the photograph of Donna Rice sitting on Gary Hart's lap.

It was not for want of trying. Four highly respected reporters in the Washington bureau worked for months on the story and were pressed repeatedly to get sources on the record and to find documentary evidence like e-mail. If McCain had been having an affair with a lobbyist seeking his help on public policy issues, and The Times had proved it, it would have been a story of unquestionable importance.

But in the absence of a smoking gun, I asked Keller why he decided to run what he had. "If the point of the story was to allege that McCain had an affair with a lobbyist, we'd have owed readers more compelling evidence than the conviction of senior staff members," he replied. "But that was not the point of the story. The point of the story was that he behaved in such a way that his close aides felt the relationship constituted reckless behavior and feared it would ruin his career."

I think that ignores the scarlet elephant in the room. A newspaper cannot begin a story about the all-but-certain Republican presidential nominee with the suggestion of an extramarital affair with an attractive lobbyist 31 years his junior and expect readers to focus on anything other than what most of them did. And if a newspaper is going to suggest an improper sexual affair, whether editors think that is the central point or not, it owes readers more proof than The Times was able to provide.

The stakes are just too big. As the flamboyant Edwin Edwards of Louisiana once said, "The only way I can lose this election is if I'm caught in bed with either a dead girl or a live boy."

The pity of it is that, without the sex, The Times was on to a good story. McCain, who was reprimanded by the Senate Ethics Committee in 1991 for exercising "poor judgment" by intervening with federal regulators on behalf of a corrupt savings and loan executive, recast himself as a crusader against special interests and the corrupting influence of money in politics.

Yet he has continued to maintain complex relationships with lobbyists like Iseman, at whose request he wrote to the Federal Communications Commission to urge a speed-up on a decision affecting one of her clients.

Much of that story has been reported over the years, but it was still worth pulling together to help voters in 2008 better understand the John McCain who might be their next president.

I asked Jill Abramson, the managing editor for news, if The Times could have done the story and left out the allegation about an affair. "That would not have reflected the essential truth of why the aides were alarmed," she said.

But what the aides believed might not have been the real truth. And if you cannot provide readers with some independent evidence, I think it is wrong to report the suppositions or concerns of anonymous aides about whether the boss is getting into the wrong bed.