

John and Vicki by Dan Jacoby

Yesterday morning (as I write this) the New York Times published a long article on John McCain's "relationship" with Vicki Iseman, a lobbyist. This column is not directly about that article, but about how the media's self-appointed pundits and the so-called "reporters" who cover Senator McCain have responded to it.

The major questions are about whether Senator McCain had an affair with Ms. Iseman during his 2000 presidential campaign, and if he didn't have an affair, why the Times reported that "some of his top advisors" were "Convinced the relationship had become romantic."

This issue was raised in the second paragraph of a 62-paragraph story, and therefore gets a lot of notice. But the article only briefly mentions his aides' "concerns" about a possible affair and concentrates mostly on what he did on behalf of a lobbyist.

Furthermore, the fourth paragraph states that both Senator McCain and Ms. Iseman "say they never had a romantic relationship." The key here is the article's wording; it doesn't claim that the two "deny" having an affair – which usually connotes disbelief of their denials – it only reports that they "say" they didn't have an affair. Clearly the reporters either don't believe there was an affair or aren't willing to make a strong claim to the contrary.

But rather than focus on the meat of the article, the contention that Senator McCain's post-Keating-rehab image is tarnished by his professional relationship with a lobbyist and the favors he may have done for her clients, the media are focusing on a claim of an affair that the article doesn't support and that almost certainly never happened.

It's pathetic!

Over thirty years ago, MGM released the movie *Network*, Paddy Cheyefsky's indictment of mass media "news" that was more concerned with getting ratings as entertainment than informing Americans. His movie was prophetic. Today, the so-called "news" shows are full of meaningless "reports" that don't report the truth but merely parrot press releases, "feel-good" features that fail to tell the whole story because it's "too depressing," and anchors and reporters who are hired and promoted more for their camera presence than their journalistic abilities.

Because the media focused almost exclusively on the possible affair, Senator McCain was able to sidestep the real questions that weren't asked. For instance:

- Senator McCain "often flew" on corporate jets owned by, among others, Rupert Murdoch, Michael R. Bloomberg (now Mayor of New York City), and Iseman client Lowell W. Paxson.
- A nonprofit group McCain "helped found" took huge corporate contributions, even as it was supposed to fight to end that practice.
- McCain "stayed in the background" during last year's ethics and lobbying reform, apparently in the hope that right-wing Republican Party power brokers would support his presidential run.

This is not the kind of “straight talk express” image John McCain has worked so hard, for so long, to build. Yet during the press conference he held the day after the Times article appeared, while there was one question about McCain flying on a Paxson-owned corporate jet, there were no questions about any of the other “ethically-challenged” actions the Times mentioned.

In other words, the press let McCain completely off the hook.

The fact is, the real charges in the Times article have nothing to do with any personal relationship Senator McCain may have had with anyone. The real charges are all about the hypocrisy of a man who claims to be better than a typical politician but is, in fact, no different from anyone else.

Apparently, the pundits and the reporters are too insipid to understand that.

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