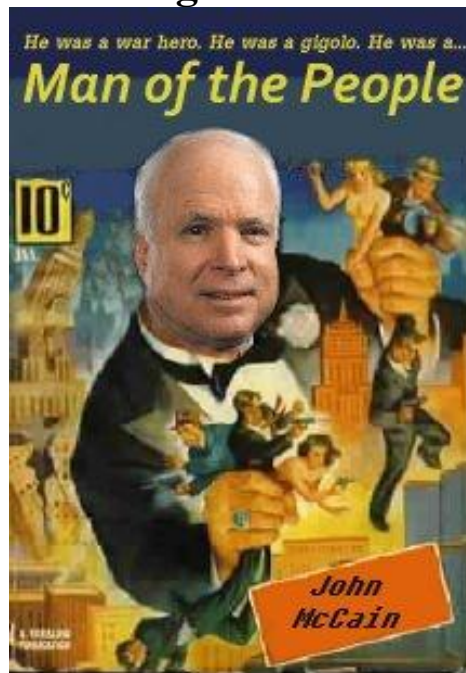


## The Drinking Man's Candidate



I want to have a beer with John McCain and ride the Straight Talk Express. He could chuckle about his Navy days when wild ways landed him at the bottom of his class and regale me with tales of his wanton youth when he rode fast cars and dated fast women, like exotic dancer Marie the Flame Thrower of Florida. I'd like to get him going on the world's best war stories, "So, John, it's Hanoi, 1967 and your Skyhawk is down. Then what happened?" I want McCain to be my drinking buddy, car trip companion, squadron leader in the apocalypse, and grandpa. I just don't want him anywhere near the presidency.

Qualities that make an interesting man can make a lousy politician. Misspent early years, rebellion against authority, and a final St. Augustine moral reversal manifesting in a candidate's "born again" philosophy leave a fellow feeling he's seen the world and knows what the country needs. Such mindset offers little room for debate and segments a complex system into categories of "right and wrong" or "good and bad". This definitive ideology is as seductive as it is scary.

During both Bush campaigns, political pundits discussed the beer factor. "It all comes down to which candidate you'd want to have a beer with." Voters agreed they'd rather toss back a few cold ones with a smiling Texan who bestowed nick-names and wore cowboy boots. It didn't matter that this southern gent was the son of a patrician political family homesteading in Kennebunkport, Main and his twang was as convincing as Madonna's British accent. He cleared brush, had a ranch in Crawford, and even racked up a DUI. That's a man you can drink with!

No one wanted to swill alongside stiff Al Gore, the Tin Man incarnate, or blowsy Heinz ketchup gigolo John Kerry (can you imagine the long-winded circuitous droning while you waited for the head to go down on your pilsner?) Still, America was unprepared to hoist those Bush beers in the middle of an Iraqi war zone dodging the limbs of suicide bombers.

With Romney straight out of central casting for *Manchurian Candidate II*, and Huckabee aw-shucksing his way around regressive political positions, McCain easily emerged as the Republican frontrunner.

Interestingly, the conservative media is ranting against their primary pick. McCain's politics are in line with the far right agenda except when they appear self-servingly independent. He opposes *Roe v. Wade*, supports clear-cut logging, anti gun control, pro death penalty, and votes against PBS funding or the Martin Luther King holiday, but for constitutional amendments making flag-burning illegal and school prayer standard. Still, when it comes to his pet projects, such as campaign finance reform ("Hey, I'm not with the Keating Five. Look at me work on this ethical money legislation.") or decrying torture ("Hey, I was in the Hanoi Hilton. Look at me work on this ethical POW legislation."), McCain is a party maverick.

He is infamous for his fiery temper and aggressive confrontational leadership. He is also well-known for his wit and storytelling style. This Republican raconteur enlivens the senate and adds color to the political process, but his outlaw status isn't right for the current climate.

When asked to release names of fellow soldiers as a prisoner of war, John McCain listed the offensive line of the Green Bay Packers. This type of thinking in a hostage situation is cinematically cool. Unfortunately, he's exhibited the same rascally ways in dealing with staff and congressional colleagues.

Politics is dry dusty business fit for bean-counters, readers of long documents, and men of dreary reason and drab restraint. It is not the place for hotheads and heroes. I like my Americans red, white, and blue, but prefer my bureaucrats in gray.

I still want to have a beer with John McCain. I was thinking we could go to this little hole-in-the-wall I know, far far far from the White House.