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Setting the record straight

By Keven Willey
The Arizona Republic
Nov. 3, 1999

We seem to have kicked up a bit of a dust storm with our editorial on Sunday titled "McCain's temper is legitimate issue: Hull's account of outbursts not unusual." It's been the topic of national television and print news accounts for several days now.

Unfortunately, the networks' new focus on what most Arizonans consider to be an old issue has been riddled with inaccuracies and misinformation. Let's set the record straight.

McCain and his band of backers have sought to spin this editorial as evidence of a "grudge match" this paper has with the senator. Several in the national media have jumped on board, portraying the editorial as part of a "vendetta" against McCain.

Vendetta?

McCain has run for office five times since he moved to Arizona. This newspaper has endorsed his candidacy all five times, most recently just a year ago, shortly after I became editor of these pages. McCain sat down with editorial board members and his Democratic opponent for nearly two hours to discuss key issues in the race and our



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questions about the candidates' positions on them. At the conclusion of the meeting, McCain thanked us for the "fairness" we accorded him. Two of his staffers later caught up to me to convey precisely the same message.

Indeed, we've applauded McCain on these pages many times over the years, including just last week for his role in seeking an amendment to legislation having to do with quiet aircraft over the Grand Canyon.

We supported McCain's efforts to open several major airports to certain long-distance flights and to deregulate certain aspects of the telecommunications industry. We've backed McCain's bold and dignified leadership on re-establishing relations with Vietnam, made all the more poignant by McCain's personal experiences as a prisoner of war. We've commended his strong and knowledgeable leadership on many national defense issues, most recently during the Kosovo upheaval. We've lauded McCain's stances against congressional pork and embraced portions of his call for campaign reform.

This newspaper published an exceptionally evenhanded 16-page special section on McCain just last month titled "The Life Story of Arizona's Maverick Senator" that provoked not a peep of peeve from the McCain camp. Heck, we even sported a front-page feature last June on McCain's spunky mom -- a piece McCain critics blasted as a puffery designed to promote the candidacy of the hometown candidate for president.

Vendetta? Right, and the Grand Canyon is in Utah.

Sure, we've also been critical of McCain. We criticized his role in the Keating Five scandal, in which McCain was cited by the Senate Ethics Committee for exercising "poor judgment." And we chastised his handling of the announcement of his wife's drug addiction - a problem that McCain acknowledged he didn't know about until after Cindy McCain kicked the habit. (Cindy McCain's admission that she stole painkillers from her own charity to support her habit was the subject of a hard-hitting but hardly unfair cartoon on these pages, so enraging McCain that it was years before

he returned phone calls from *Republic* staffers.) We've banged on him more recently for a tasteless joke about Chelsea Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno.

Yes, we've been critical of McCain's volatility and his public belittling of people with whom he disagrees -- whether they are former Gov. Rose Mofford at a hearing in Washington, the Jewish man he lambasted for objecting to McCain's speech referring to "Christian" compassion for the homeless, or a public reference to the Leisure World retirement community as "Seizure World." If McCain comes unglued over this sort of local scrutiny, what can we expect once the national scrutiny kicks in?

McCain and his backers also have sought to paint Sunday's editorial as part of an orchestrated campaign by Texas Gov. George W. Bush to undermine McCain's campaign for president. Again, patently untrue. Here are the facts:

Last week, the New York Times published a front-page story about McCain's testy relations with Arizona Gov. Jane Hull, the state's other top Republican officeholder, who described McCain's difficulty in controlling his temper. It was followed by a critical column by a member of the Wall Street Journal's editorial board. In those pieces, McCain pleaded guilty to passion but insisted he doesn't "insult anybody or fly off the handle or anything like that."

This isn't a debate about the virtues of passion. There are many. This was an editorial correcting a statement McCain made about his own conduct in those national pieces, a statement that many in Arizona who have worked with him over the past 17 years know to be simply untrue. We at *The Republic* may be old-fashioned, but we believe that, as the major newspaper that probably knows McCain best, we have an obligation to set the record straight and provide as full and complete a picture of John McCain as possible.

The fact is McCain has "insulted" people and "flown off the handle."

To portray responsible journalism as puppetry to a
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rival candidate is yet another example of the unfounded, sarcastic and condescending charges to which McCain, unfortunately, is prone.

Think about it. McCain is alleging that the New York Times news pages, the Wall Street Journal's editorial pages (we all know how close those two are), *The Arizona Republic*, Gov. Hull and just about anybody else who criticizes him all take their marching orders from the governor of Texas.

That's absurd.

Frankly, the national discussion of all this so far has been exceedingly disappointing. It's been characterized by half-truths and untruths.

This isn't about passion, vendettas or candidate manipulation. It's about character - the issue around which McCain himself has wrapped his campaign. It shouldn't come as a surprise that there are more faces to McCain's character than the simplistic one he and his backers are working so hard to put forward.

Keven Willey can be reached at opinions@pni.com or at 1-602-444-8499.

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