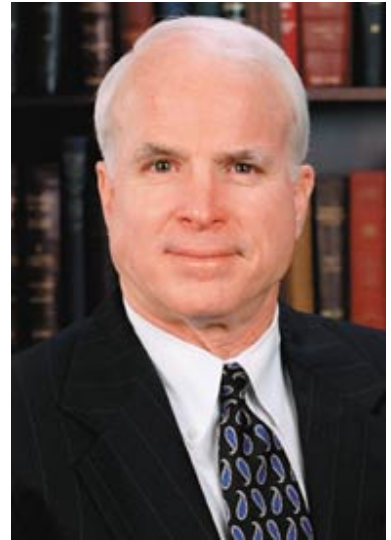


Interview:

John McCain

By Charley J. Levine

A third-term senator, John McCain revels in his reputation as a champion of national defense and crusading reformer of government systems. The son and grandson of United States Navy admirals, McCain, himself a naval aviator, spent over five years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Chairman of the Senate's Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, he is being touted by insiders as the next Foreign Relations Committee chair, an appointment that would not in the least disappoint Israel's many American supporters.



Q. President Bush spelled out a formula in June 2002 through which the Palestinians had to reform, democratize and stop inciting their children to hatred against Israel before they would be entitled to statehood. A few months later, the State Department came out with the “road map” whose purpose, many said, was to take back the diplomatic initiative from the White House. Unlike the president’s formula, the road map moves all developments along simultaneously. How do you see this?

A: I don't think anybody believes there is any viable road map at this moment. A cessation of violence must take place before any road map can be pursued.

Q. You are one of the few vocal advocates on Capitol Hill of Israel’s security wall. How come?

A: I believe that for an indeterminate period we must find ways for Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace.... That's why we have the wall. That's why we [recognize] that as long as there are going to be people who will cross over into Israel and commit acts of terror, there won't be peace. Perhaps if that wall is complete, and if there is a drastic reduction in the acts of terror...then maybe gradually a time will arrive that will allow for serious negotiations. I for one don't see how anyone can be an effective prime minister of the Palestinians without controlling his troops. [Yasser] Arafat is not prepared to do that.

Q. Do you join the chorus of those who think Arafat has to go?

A: He must be reduced to irrelevancy because he is irrelevant to any meaningful progress toward peace. That means turning over to any Palestinian prime minister and legislature full authority over their security forces. I met with then Prime Minister [Mahmoud] Abbas in August [2003]. I asked him flat out whether Arafat was undermining him. He said that was absolutely the case.

Q. Has the time come to rethink the entire concept of a Palestinian state?

A: We should have a commitment to a Palestinian state, but I think we must also have a commitment to Palestinian democracy, one that entails the rule of law, an effective legislative body and all the trappings of a democracy, which is clearly not the case...today.

Q. You are a big fan of Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, who argued that America could not and should not play ball with nondemocratic regimes—as distinct from the d’tente policies often preferred by the State Department. Which is it: principle or pragmatism?

A: History has proven that if you deal too closely with a totalitarian state, you may pay a heavy price over time. The Shah of Iran, the Saudis now, Saddam Hussein. For many years we had close relations with Saddam and viewed him as a counterweight to Iran. We are making the same mistake now with some countries that have huge oil reserves in Central Asia. You can deal with those countries because you can't totally isolate them, but it is a mistake to seek relationships that are mutually beneficial.

Q. Can there ever be a military solution to terror-driven dictatorships? What ultimately can turn the tide?

A: In a word, democracy is the answer. As long as there are young men standing around street corners...with no jobs and no future and no opportunities, you are going to find breeding grounds for terrorists. If democracy will take root in Iraq, and I think it can, that will send a signal to every desperate religious extremist in the Middle East.

Q. Is the world a better place as a result of the war in Iraq?

A: The world is a better place. Iraq is a better place. America is a better place. Yet we still have a battle for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. We are doing better than some people think. The Sunni Triangle, the area in central Iraq where Sunnis dominate the population, is still dangerous, bad people are still there, and we have to do a better job.

Q. Is it relevant to find Saddam?

A: It is extremely relevant. More so than finding Osama bin Laden. As long as there are people in Iraq who cling to the belief that Saddam will come back to power, peace will be much more difficult. We told them he would be out in 1991, yet he wasn't. So you can understand the caution. I believe we will find him. Somebody is going to want to make \$30 million. It may not be soon, though.

Q. How has the Israel-United States relationship changed since September 11?

A: Government to government hasn't changed much, but I think Americans are more sympathetic to the plight of the Israeli people because they experienced acts of terror in their own country. Also, Americans don't buy this propaganda that it is violence or attacks by Israel which incites Palestinian terrorists to retaliate. We responded to attacks on the World Trade Center by going to Afghanistan. We didn't buy it either.

Q. What do we know about Israel's POW's and MIA's?

A: Concerning those that were captured in Lebanon, we know who controls Lebanon, and that is Syria. We should be putting a lot more pressure on Syria to account for those we know were taken prisoner. It's fact. There is no dispute—while there may be some question about others who were taken prisoner earlier under different circumstances. I respect a hallowed tradition of the nation's military, the Israeli military. They never leave anyone behind and that tradition also applies to [long-time captive] Ron Arad.

Q. Fact or fiction: Iran has suddenly bowed to the pressure of the nations to permit inspection of its nuclear program. A United Nations report said that Iran was in compliance.

A: I am a little suspicious of this latest agreement. It was clearly made to the exclusion of the United States of America. We have said that we will give this plan a chance to see if the Iranians are in compliance, but I am a little skeptical because the United States was not involved in the negotiations.

Q. Four years ago, you were knocking on doors in New Hampshire. What do you think about the campaign so far?

A: I love New Hampshire. It's a beautiful state....but the people in New Hampshire are notoriously slow in making up their minds. As a Republican, I am a strong supporter of the two-party system. I worry about the Democratic Party swinging so far to the left that we might see a repetition of 1972 [when President Richard

Nixon won a lopsided victory over liberal Senator George McGovern]. I want President Bush to be reelected, but I think it would be harmful to the country to see an isolationist, protectionist, xenophobic Democratic nominee for president, if only for the reason that I don't think he or she would be representing the main philosophy of the majority of the Democratic Party. I am concerned about a rampant lurch to the left in order to appeal to the Democratic fringe.

Q. So will it be President George W. Bush again at the end of 2004?

A: I think so, particularly with a recovering economy. Should the economy falter, though, all bets are off.