

Getting to Know John McCain

By KARL ROVE

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It came to me while I was having dinner with Doris Day. No, not *that* Doris Day. The Doris Day who is married to Col. Bud Day, Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, fighter pilot, Vietnam POW and roommate of John McCain at the Hanoi Hilton.

As we ate near the Days' home in Florida recently, I heard things about Sen. McCain that were deeply moving and politically troubling. Moving because they told me things about him the American people need to know. And troubling because it is clear that Mr. McCain is one of the most private individuals to run for president in history.

When it comes to choosing a president, the American people want to know more about a candidate than policy positions. They want to know about character, the values ingrained in his heart. For Mr. McCain, that means they will want to know more about him personally than he has been willing to reveal.

Mr. Day relayed to me one of the stories Americans should hear. It involves what happened to him after escaping from a North Vietnamese prison during the war. When he was recaptured, a Vietnamese captor broke his arm and said, "I told you I would make you a cripple."

The break was designed to shatter Mr. Day's will. He had survived in prison on the hope that one day he would return to the United States and be able to fly again. To kill that hope, the Vietnamese left part of a bone sticking out of his arm, and put him in a misshapen cast. This was done so that the arm would heal at "a goofy angle," as Mr. Day explained. Had it done so, he never would have flown again.

But it didn't heal that way because of John McCain. Risking severe punishment, Messrs. McCain and Day collected pieces of bamboo in the prison courtyard to use as a splint. Mr. McCain put Mr. Day on the floor of their cell and, using his foot, jerked the broken bone into place. Then, using strips from the bandage on his own wounded leg and the bamboo, he put Mr. Day's splint in place.

Years later, Air Force surgeons examined Mr. Day and complimented the treatment he'd gotten from his captors. Mr. Day corrected them. It was Dr. McCain who deserved the credit. Mr. Day went on to fly again.

Another story I heard over dinner with the Days involved Mr. McCain serving as one of the three chaplains for his fellow prisoners. At one point, after being shuttled among different prisons, Mr. Day had found himself as the most senior officer at the Hanoi Hilton. So he tapped Mr. McCain to help administer religious services to the other prisoners.

Today, Mr. Day, a very active 83, still vividly recalls Mr. McCain's sermons. "He remembered the Episcopal liturgy," Mr. Day says, "and sounded like a bona fide preacher." One of Mr. McCain's first sermons took as its text Luke 20:25 and Matthew 22:21, "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." Mr. McCain said he and his fellow prisoners shouldn't ask God to free them, but to help them become the best people they could be while serving as POWs. It was Caesar who put them in prison and Caesar who would get them out. Their task was to act with honor.

Another McCain story, somewhat better known, is about the Vietnamese practice of torturing him by tying his head between his ankles with his arms behind him, and then leaving him for hours. The torture so badly busted up his shoulders that to this day Mr. McCain can't raise his arms over his head.

One night, a Vietnamese guard loosened his bonds, returning at the end of his watch to tighten them again so no one would notice. Shortly after, on Christmas Day, the same guard stood beside Mr. McCain in the prison yard and drew a cross in the sand before erasing it. Mr. McCain later said that when he returned to Vietnam for the first time after the war, the only person he really wanted to meet was that guard.

Mr. Day recalls with pride Mr. McCain stubbornly refusing to accept special treatment or curry favor to be released early, even when gravely ill. Mr. McCain knew the Vietnamese wanted the propaganda victory of the son and grandson of Navy admirals accepting special treatment. "He wasn't corruptible then," Mr. Day says, "and he's not corruptible today."

The stories told to me by the Days involve more than wartime valor.

For example, in 1991 Cindy McCain was visiting Mother Teresa's orphanage in Bangladesh when a dying infant was thrust into her hands. The orphanage could not provide the medical care needed to save her life, so Mrs. McCain brought the child home to America with her. She was met at the airport by her husband, who asked what all this was about.

Mrs. McCain replied that the child desperately needed surgery and years of rehabilitation. "I hope she can stay with us," she told her husband. Mr. McCain agreed. Today that child is their teenage daughter Bridget.

I was aware of this story. What I did not know, and what I learned from Doris, is that there was a second infant Mrs. McCain brought back. She ended up being adopted by a young McCain aide and his wife.

"We were called at midnight by Cindy," Wes Gullett remembers, and "five days later we met our new daughter Nicki at the L.A. airport wearing the only clothing Cindy could find on the trip back, a 7-Up T-shirt she bought in the Bangkok airport." Today, Nicki is a high school sophomore. Mr. Gullett told me, "I never saw a hospital bill" for her care.

A few, but not many, of the stories told to me by the Days have been written about, such as in Robert Timberg's 1996 book "A Nightingale's Song." But Mr. McCain rarely refers to them on the campaign trail. There is something admirable in his reticence, but he needs to overcome it.

Private people like Mr. McCain are rare in politics for a reason. Candidates who are uncomfortable sharing their interior lives limit their appeal. But if Mr. McCain is to win the election this fall, he has to open up.

Americans need to know about his vision for the nation's future, especially his policy positions and domestic reforms. They also need to learn about the moments in his life that shaped him. Mr. McCain cannot make this a biography-only campaign but he can't afford to make it a biography-free campaign either. Unless he opens up more, many voters will never know the experiences of his life that show his character, integrity and essential decency.

These qualities mattered in America's first president and will matter as Americans decide on their 44th president.

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