

John McCain in Ann Arbor: a cowardly evasion on US war crimes

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John McCain, the Republican senator from Arizona, made an appearance Wednesday night at the Borders book store near the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor. The event was part of a national book-signing tour for McCain's newly published book, co-authored by Mark Salter, entitled *Character Is Destiny: Inspiring Stories Every Young Person Should Know and Every Adult Should Remember*.

It is no secret that the publication of the book and the tour are bound up with McCain's presidential aspirations. In introductory remarks prior to taking questions and signing copies of his book, the senator told his audience of perhaps 150 people that he "may be running for president" in 2008. McCain ran unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination against George W. Bush in 2000.

McCain, a Vietnam War navy pilot who was shot down and held for five-and-a-half years as a prisoner of war by the North Vietnamese, was first elected to the US Senate in 1986 and is the senior senator from Arizona. A war hawk and "free market" conservative, McCain has made a political career by presenting himself as a Republican maverick, appealing simultaneously to patriotic, militarist sentiment and popular revulsion over rampant corruption and corporate bribery in Washington.

The Arizona senator has avidly supported the Iraq war from the outset, echoing the Bush administration's claim that it is the "front line" in a global crusade for democracy and civilization against terrorist evil-doers bent on destroying America. When he has at various times criticized Bush's conduct of the war, he has generally argued for more troops and more effective measures to crush the Iraqi resistance.

McCain, who sits on the Senate Armed Services Committee, is among those members of Congress who

have close ties to the military brass and reflect the concerns within the military that Bush's disastrous handling of the war is undermining morale and threatening a Vietnam War-like breakdown. Among these concerns are the consequences, both for the international image of the US and the fate of American soldiers captured on the battlefield, of the administration's open defense of torture. McCain has criticized the administration position on abductions, secret prisons and the treatment of alleged terrorists and has co-sponsored a resolution to bar the US from using torture or abusive methods against detainees.

In his introductory remarks at the Ann Arbor book signing, McCain, well aware of the antiwar sentiment that prevails on the University of Michigan campus, made no direct mention of the Iraq war. He did, however, indicate the "values" that his book promotes by singling out for praise one of its subjects: Pat Tillman, the professional football player who joined the military after 9/11 and was killed on a battlefield in Afghanistan.

After McCain's remarks, this writer asked the following question:

"Senator, you have taken a position against torture. But there is an underlying principle that was laid down at the Nuremberg trial after World War Two. The prosecutors of the Nazi leaders—the lead American prosecutor was US Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson—asserted that the primary war crime committed by the defendants, from which all of the other atrocities sprang, including torture, concentration camps and the extermination of entire populations, was the planning and carrying out of aggressive war. Do you believe that this principle is still valid? And if so, should not those US government and military officials who planned and carried out the unprovoked war against Iraq be made

legally and criminally subject to this principle?”

McCain did not answer the question. He dodged it by saying he had a different understanding of the Nuremburg principle: namely, that a soldier or official could not legally absolve himself of criminal actions on the grounds that he was merely carrying out orders. The senator then went on to say torture was wrong because it did not “work,” and was harmful to US legitimacy and America’s image around the world.

This evasion revealed the hypocritical essence of McCain’s democratic pretensions—and not only McCain’s, but those of the entire political establishment, supporters and critics of the Bush administration, Republicans and Democrats alike. They are all implicated in a war based on lies, carried out in defiance of international law, against a country that had neither attacked nor threatened to attack the United States.

This is, under the definition laid down at Nuremburg, a war crime. It is the crime for which Nazi civilian and military leaders were hung, and others imprisoned. It is worth recalling the words of Robert Jackson about the universal applicability of this principle. He wrote: “If certain acts of violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others which we would not be willing to have invoked against us.”

For McCain and others to deplore certain of the methods used in the conduct of the Iraq war, while upholding the legitimacy of the war itself and opposing its termination, is not only sophistry, it is a repudiation of Nuremburg and the framework of international law that was laid down in its aftermath. It is little more than damage control, whose essential purpose is to facilitate new acts of military aggression in the future.

Another exchange during McCain’s Ann Arbor appearance underscored the senator’s militarist and imperialist perspective. An elderly woman in the audience asked: “Why did Bush go into Iraq? I was born in Germany, and Hitler did the same thing.”

McCain was reduced, by way of a response, to reciting the absurd litany that grows more threadbare with each repetition: “He, I, the Israelis, the French, the Russians—we all believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. It was a massive intelligence failure, but it was not a massive

conspiracy.”

In answer to a subsequent question about the war, McCain resorted to the fear-mongering that is the stock-in-trade of the Bush administration, declaring that should the US troops leave Iraq, Zarqawi and the terrorists would “follow them back to the US.”



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