The New York Times and the 2008 elections: What the McCain "exposé" reveals

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The lengthy front-page report that appeared February 21 in the *New York Times*, detailing the ties between Senator John McCain and a telecommunications lobbyist, was an apparent attempt to damage the campaign of the presumptive Republican nominee for president and assist his prospective Democratic opponent, either Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton.

The leading US newspaper devoted thousands of words to a turgid and convoluted account of McCain's relations with the telecommunications industry and other powerful corporate lobbies. The bulk of the article dealt with events in 1999, when McCain was chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee. The article also rehashed events even more remote, when McCain was reprimanded by the Senate Ethics Committee in 1991 for his involvement with convicted savings and loan swindler Charles Keating.

This account, prepared by a team of four reporters over several months, did little to distinguish McCain from the other 99 US senators, who all operate, to a greater or lesser extent, as the representatives and advocates of various corporate and financial interests.

Evidently aware of this, the *Times* chose to spice up its account with a suggestion—featured in the second paragraph of the article but completely without supporting evidence—that McCain was having an affair with the telecommunications lobbyist, Vickie Iseman, more than 30 years his junior.

The allegation was legalistically worded, as the supposition of former McCain aides involved in his 2000 presidential campaign: "Convinced the relationship had become romantic, some of his top advisers intervened to protect the candidate from himself—instructing staff members to block the woman's access, privately warning her away and repeatedly confronting him, several people involved in the campaign said on the condition of anonymity."

Given the lack of any substantiation of this alleged belief, to give it so prominent a place in the article suggests an effort to foment a sex scandal as a means of undermining the McCain presidential campaign, either by causing a backlash among the Christian fundamentalists who constitute the right-wing base of the Republican Party, or by provoking McCain himself into an angry explosion that might serve to discredit him.

The operation has, at least so far, produced the opposite effect. Right-wing and fundamentalist groups have rallied around McCain, declaring him the victim of a smear campaign by the "liberal media." McCain has flatly denied any sexual relationship with Iseman, while defending his contacts with the telecommunications companies as business as usual on Capitol Hill.

The *Times* has been roundly criticized, not only by pro-McCain right-wing pundits and Republican Party operatives, but by the bulk of the daily press. Many newspapers that subscribe to the New York Times News Service and regularly carry its material refused to reprint the article on McCain. Even the *Boston Globe*, owned by the New York Times Co., reprinted an article by the *Washington Post*, examining McCain's dealings with lobbyists without making any suggestion of a sexual relationship, rather than the *New York Times* article.

The public editor of the *Times*, Clark Hoyt, published a column Sunday which was sharply critical of the McCain article. Noting that executive editor Bill Keller defended the article as an examination of McCain's connections to lobbying, he wrote, "most readers saw it as something else altogether. They saw it as a story about illicit sex. And most were furious at The Times."

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Hoyt reveals that while the *Times* did not have eyewitness or other evidence of a McCain affair with Vickie Iseman, "It was not for want of trying. Four highly respected reporters in the Washington bureau worked for months on the story and were pressed repeatedly to get sources on the record and to find documentary evidence like e-mail." If the *Times* could have proven the affair, he continues, "it would have been a story of unquestionable importance."

Why? Of what interest was it to anyone outside of McCain, Iseman and their immediate families what their private relationship was? What *political* significance is one to attach to such an affair?

In devoting its resources to such sexual muckraking, the *New York Times* is simply aping the methods of the right-wing scandal-mongers who sought to bring down the Clinton White House over Clinton's relations with Monica Lewinsky. (The *Times*, it should be recalled, provided badly needed legitimacy to this sordid and reactionary business by defending the inquisition conducted by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr).

Senator John McCain is a right-wing bourgeois politician who will almost certainly become the presidential nominee of the Republican Party. He is running on a pledge to carry forward the militarist policies of the Bush administration: its illegal invasion of Iraq, its colonial war in Afghanistan, its bullying of countries throughout the world in the name of the "war on terror."

It is not difficult to make a compelling political case against McCain's candidacy, but that case would have nothing to do with McCain's personal relations with this or that figure in Washington.

The *New York Times*, the most prominent voice of American liberalism, is incapable of making such a case, not only because it shares the same political framework—defense of the profit system and the strategic interests of American imperialism—but because the liberal sections of the ruling elite have moved so far to the right that they can hardly articulate any significant differences with the program of Bush, Cheney and McCain. (The *Times* demonstrated this by endorsing McCain in the Republican primary in New York, held February 5).

The prostration of liberalism before the ultra-right is demonstrated every day in the pages of the *Times* and other leading newspapers, to say nothing of the television networks. The utter banality of the coverage of the US presidential election campaign is a case in point.

There is no attempt to analyze the social forces at work in the various campaigns, no assessment of the broader meaning of events, even under conditions of a contest that has seen all the conventional wisdom overturned repeatedly. Instead, article after article assesses the rival candidates in the most superficial fashion: their demeanor, their moods, their tactics, their poll numbers, their marketing.

The *Times* has failed to seriously examine the significance of the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination, now one of the most protracted in history and one that has produced record voter turnout.

It, like the rest of the corporate-controlled media, avoids any examination of the political divisions within the ruling elite that underlie the nomination contest, which revolve around growing concerns over the disastrous consequences of the failures of the Bush administration, particularly in foreign policy.

The obsessive focus on scandal-mongering is part of the process by which the corporate interests that control the mass media seek to manipulate the electoral process. It serves not to educate or inform people, but to confuse them and ultimately stampede them in one direction or another.

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