

OBAMA'S GETTING INTO MCCAIN'S CONTEMPTUOUS HEAD

Both Jonathan Chait and Daniel Larison have great columns noting the how his contempt for his opponents always fuels John McCain's campaigns. Jeebus—Larison sounds like bmaz at his crankiest:

McCain exploits the concept of honor and frames every disagreement in terms of honor and dishonor, so it is particularly revealing that he is willing to launch dishonest and dishonorable attacks, because this drives home how much his concept of honor is intertwined with his own visceral reactions to opponents and with his self-interest. Contrary to the conventional pundit interpretation that McCain has “sold his soul” and abandoned his once-honorable former self, the thing to understand about McCain's lies in this campaign is that he invests these misrepresentations with his utter contempt for his opponents. From McCain's perspective, this infusion of contempt seems to transform shoddy, baseless attacks that disgrace *him* into indictments of the other politicians (e.g., Romney wants to surrender in Iraq, Obama would rather lose a war than lose an election). If McCain thinks he is always honorable, resistance to him and his ideas must ultimately be villainous and vicious, and **we have seen him deploy his perverse, solipsistic ends-justify-the-means concept of honor** against Romney and now against Obama. McCain's admirers have largely missed this either because they happened to agree with McCain on policy or because they have mistaken

his language of honor and principle to refer to the meanings that they attach to these terms.

In any public confrontation that McCain has, he strives to show that he has kept faith with the public and his opponents have betrayed the public trust. **This isn't because McCain is *actually* some devoted servant of the public interest, but because he has an irrepressible self-righteous streak that he thinks permits him to impugn the integrity of anyone who gets on his nerves or gets in his way.** Hence it was not enough for him to find fault with action or inaction by the SEC—Chris Cox must have betrayed the public trust. **Because McCain's views are visceral, not intellectual, and he is not interested in policy detail,** everything is a morality play, and it goes without saying that he thinks he is the hero.

[snip]

The important thing about McCain's lying about Obama and his positions, which he has been doing on and off for months, is not that it marks some great break with a previously honorable campaign style, but that it reveals the completely opportunistic approach to campaigning—and policymaking, for that matter—that McCain has embraced his entire career. [my emphasis]

Larison nails the ties between McCain's own self-righteousness and his attempts to cloak baseless attacks on his opponents in the trappings of honor—as well as his aversion to policy.

Which is why I think McCain's response this week is even more fraught with danger for McCain than the polls yet reflect.

When McCain contemptuously says in the video

above (at 1:36):

Maybe just this once [Obama] could spare us the lectures and admit to his own poor judgment in contributing to these problems.

He's trying to deploy the same contempt Chait and Larison describe so well. He's trying to inflict a cost on Obama for being willing to talk about policy by reframing those policy discussions as "lectures." He's doing this for two reasons. To try to make Obama want to shut up. And to distract from questions of whether Obama's policy discussions rightly interpret events or not. As Larison describes so well, McCain is trying to substitute a visceral reaction against Obama for a substantive policy discussion.

Because, of course, McCain loses on just about every policy issue in this campaign. When McCain calls for doing the same thing to health care as he and his allies have to the banking industry even as the banking industry collapses...

Opening up the health insurance market to more vigorous nationwide competition, as we have done over the last decade in banking, would provide more choices of innovative products less burdened by the worst excesses of state-based regulation.

... He has to try to make policy discussions themselves dishonorable. But we're at a moment where everyone wants to—has to, really—talk about policy.

This moment—in which Obama's judgment on a complex issue proves right while all the evidence proves McCain to be dead wrong—reminds me of McCain's previously worst moment in this campaign: when Obama traveled to Iraq, proved his stature on the world stage, just as Nuri al-Maliki was adopting Obama's plan for withdrawal from Iraq. Then, as now, McCain was forced not

only to admit that policy matters, but that Obama was right and McCain wrong on a critical policy issue.

When McCain said, "spare us the lectures," all I could think of was a high school flunkie who was belittling one of the smart kids in an attempt to avoid admitting his own frustration with being an academic failure. McCain was trying to make "smart" uncool.

John McCain is revealing a fundamental insecurity about being wrong, wrong, wrong on the issues, a bitterness that others would deign to treat policy as an important matter. And it's beginning to short-circuit his contempt-driven outrage. If John McCain doesn't even believe his own hero worship anymore, then he's got little left.