

BRAND NEW MCCAIN

✖ This John Heilemann column asking why McCain's brand has tanked among journalists has gotten a lot of attention in the blogosphere. I'm fascinated more by what it says about the press than what it says about McCain.

Here's Heilemann's premise.

In the past several weeks, the shift of press-corps sentiment against McCain has been stark and undeniable, even among heavies such as Matthews long accused by the left of being residents of the Arizonan's amen corner. Jonathan Alter, Joe Klein, Richard Cohen, David Ignatius, Jacob Weisberg: all former McCain admirers now turned brutal critics. Equally if not more damaging, the shift has been just as pronounced, if less operatic, among straight-news reporters. Suddenly, McCain is no longer being portrayed as a straight-talking, truth-telling maverick but as a liar, a fraud, and an opportunist with acute anger-management issues.

Note Heilemann's assumption: this change happened in the last "several weeks." And because the press sentiment shifted, John McCain is now portrayed "as a liar, a fraud, and an opportunist with acute anger-management issues." Though he doesn't say it explicitly, Heilemann weakly concludes that John McCain's fall-out with his press buddies has at least exacerbated—if not caused—his recent failures.

From his initial assumptions, Heilemann tells the following narrative. He traces McCain's popularity to his 2000 run.

McCain's darlinghood was largely a vestige of his 2000 race in the Republican primaries, when his challenge to George W. Bush and the GOP

Establishment, his reformist stances, and, not least, his freewheeling open-access press policy on the *Straight Talk Express* earned him countless fans among inky-fingered wretches.

And notes all the McCain BS that the press ignored.

Over the past eight years [McCain's brand] had proved durable, most of all with the press, which consistently saw McCain's deviations from what were supposed to be his core beliefs as aberrations. The speech at Falwell's university? The reversals on the Bush tax cuts and torture? The support for the teaching of "intelligent design"? All had been dismissed by the press corps as necessary hedges, as a matter of McCain doing what he had to do to win the GOP nomination.

Heilemann repeats McCain's bogus claim that everything changed when Obama refused McCain's town hall proposal.

But many longtime McCain watchers say that the candidate's own gathering sense of frustration made him ripe for such a change. "It offended him that Obama walked away from his promise to do town-hall debates—and that the press didn't seem to care," says Dan Schnur, McCain's 2000 communications director. "And then he did a series of nontraditional campaign events, like his poverty tour, and was alternately ignored or mocked by the media. And my guess is that gave Steve much greater leverage in saying, 'Let's try a different approach.' "

And then, the narrative continues, playing on what Heilemann seems to accept is McCain's "frustration" with events of the campaign, Steve Schmidt convinced McCain to go negative and

clamp down on the press.

In the interest of greater message discipline, his advisers eliminated his running back-of-the-bus (or front-of-the-plane) bullshit sessions with reporters. And they turned sharply negative in their approach to Obama, hammering him with a series of ads—seen by some as trivial and trivializing, by others as racially coded, and eventually by most as unexpectedly effective—focused on his status as a celebrity unqualified to be commander-in-chief.

Heilemann repeats his judgment that this part of the campaign—the early Schmidt-drive negative attacks—was deemed successful by the press.

The irony here is that, for so many months, the campaign being waged by Schmidt & Co. was viewed by the press as devious, sure, but deviously brilliant, delivering to McCain innumerable victories in the battle for the daily—and even hourly—news cycle.

Somehow—Heilemann doesn't explain how—between the success of late July, when Schmidt took over, and post-GOP Convention September, the press just lost it.

But then came September—and everything changed. The selection of Palin. The lipstick-pig imbroglio. The ad accusing Obama of supporting the teaching of sex education to kindergartners, along with a slew of other spots rife with distortions and fabrications. Perhaps it was the sheer number of such incidents, perhaps the depth of their mendacity. But the meme began to take hold in the press that the “old McCain” was dead. Or perhaps that he had never existed in the first place.

Which brings us to where we are today. Heilemann points out two things. First, that the press' of McCain has not only made them immune to McCain's stunts, but has exacerbated McCain's own anger problems.

"Lipstick on a pig and sex ed were the last straw for some of McCain's old hands and media allies. And because of this cynicism, he didn't get the benefit of the doubt for his 'suspension,' and it was treated as the stunt it was."

For McCain, seeing the press—"my base," as he once famously put it—turn against him has apparently been more than painful. According to people close to the campaign, it accounts for much of the seething, simmering anger that he's displayed of late on the hustings.

After tracing the effect of the now-sour relationship between McCain and the press, Heilemann offers the conclusion that McCain's probably lost the race, partly because any stunts will be received—presumably by the press—as wild-assed gambits.

It's possible, of course, that Sarah Palin's debate performance—competent enough to relegate questions about her readiness and intellectual capacity to the back burner—may help McCain to find his way back to a happier place. But it will do little to alter the fundamentals of the race, which now tilt strongly in Obama's favor. The financial crisis has not only put the economy front and center, but it has also raised the stakes of the election, thus making the kinds of attacks that kept McCain afloat in the late summer seem tactical and unpersuasive. Moreover, with the media filter where it is now, any wild-assed gambits that McCain undertakes are likely to be dismissed out of hand and vocally called out, thus diminishing

their effectiveness.

Now, to be fair to Heilemann, he doesn't make the latter conclusion that strongly: that McCain will lose the race because he alienated the press. But he suggests at least a correlation between McCain's relationship with the press and his success: by claiming the initial August attacks were successful, by suggesting that—if the press had given McCain the benefit of the doubt with his campaign "suspension"—it would have worked, and finally by concluding that anything McCain tries going forward will be called out (again, presumably by the press) and therefore neutralized. Heilemann doesn't claim that if McCain had not alienated the press he would have won, but he does suggest that he couldn't win without the press.

I'm not entirely unsympathetic with this claim. I'll confess that when the McCain team tried to cover up all of Palin's dirty laundry by lying repeatedly, I held my breath for a week, knowing that if the press grew tired of calling Palin on her 20th retelling of the Bridge to Nowhere line, she might well begin to resonate with voters. Though Palin's ignorance and corruption are much more evident than George Bush's, and though many details of Palin's corruption were first exposed by bloggers, Bush's success warns that if the press remains entirely snookered by a candidate, it may be enough to win elections.

But look what Heilemann's story doesn't include: the voters and ideology. This is a story about McCain's brand—but the only ingredients to that brand are McCain's image and his formerly adoring press, not the voters.

With that in mind, look back at Heilemann's narrative. First, he largely excuses a willingness to go negative on McCain's "frustration" with Obama's refusal to do his town hall stunt and with the failure of "I Love NOLA Even If I Ignored Her During Katrina" tour. Set aside the fact that the NOLA stunt was a stunt—as much a lie as McCain's "suspension"

stunt—designed to falsely pretend that McCain—a guy who has always put his free trade policies ahead of the pain it causes in America—gave a damn about the poor. That is, that event was an ideological lie, one the campaign tried only because Hillary's late-primary success largely came from her greater success at speaking to the economic pain Americans were feeling.

But let's be honest. McCain may well have been "frustrated" in mid-summer. But that frustration stemmed immediately from Obama's resounding success overseas, where he scored many points on what had been key issues for McCain, like Iraq. His frustration stemmed from the fact that he was losing—that he was unable to capitalize on the competitive Democratic primary, and that Obama was able to steadily increase his lead after winning the primary. And perhaps most of all, McCain was frustrated that he was being beaten by a guy that McCain considered an unworthy opponent.

McCain was frustrated when he decided to go negative—but he was frustrated because his ideology wasn't working with voters.

To resume with Heilemann's narrative: he states, twice, that the initial negative ads—dating to the July 30 Britney Spears ad, presumably—were successful because they helped McCain win the battle for the daily and hourly news cycle. Heilemann measures their success, I guess, by how much attention the press gave them. Because while the negative attacks were successful in chipping away at Obama's lead, chipping about four points off Obama's lead, **they never succeeded in giving McCain the lead.** The only thing that gave McCain a lead—the only lead he had against Obama since March, when economics and Hillary's own negative attacks were hurting Obama—was the selection of Governor Palin.

Two more bits about Heilemann's narrative. I'm sure—as "people close to the campaign" say—that McCain is seething because the press is calling him on his BS. But be honest. He's seething because the press is calling his BS and, as a

result, he's losing. But it's more than that. The stuff that has really tanked McCain's chances—as Heilemann points out—is the economic collapse. Or rather, the demonstration that McCain has no plan to fix the problems with the economy and in fact his own plans are to appoint Phil Gramm to continue the same policies that got us into this mess.

So it's not that his gimmicks didn't work—it's that his gimmicks were unsuccessful in covering up that voters hated his ideology and (when it came down to it) his lack of leadership on the economy. This was about votes rejecting McCain and his ideology as much as it was about the press rejecting McCain's gimmicks.

And speaking of gimmicks—that leaves Palin, the one thing that allowed McCain to pull into a lead when he was in a face-to-face matchup against Obama.

As I confessed, I was really really worried about whether or not the press would call Palin on her lies. Whether they would pursue the barely hidden evidence of corruption. Whether they would demand she talk to them. I knew that if they didn't, McCain might have a shot. If they did, Palin would end up back-firing. They did two of those three (they seem to have given up on a press conference from her).

But that says that the relationship that mattered—the one that brought about McCain's demise—was not McCain's relationship with the press, per se.

Rather, it was about the press' relationship with **Palin**. Not McCain. Palin.

Granted, McCain presumably bought off on Schmidt's plan to shutter Palin away—and the plan was, ultimately, Schmidt's.

But the biggest factor in this story—aside from the voters and McCain's unpopular ideology that Heilemann apparently doesn't consider to be part of McCain's brand—is that Palin's abusive relationship with the press made it impossible

for the excitement surrounding her pick to overcome the crappiness of John McCain's ideology.