

DRAPER'S SILENT NARRATIVE OF RESENTMENT

Two things stuck out for me in Robert Draper's story of the changing narratives of the McCain campaign. First, he repeats the McCain myth that Obama showed an interest—but no initiative—in McCain's ploy to do town halls around the country together.

In June, McCain formally proposed that he and his Democratic opponent campaign together across America in a series of town-hall-style meetings. He had in fact suggested the same thing to Joe Biden three years earlier, Biden told me back then: "He said: 'Let's make a deal if we end up being the nominees. Let's commit to do what Goldwater and Kennedy committed to do before Kennedy was shot.' We agreed that we would campaign together, same plane, get off in the same city and go to 30 states or whatever together." According to Biden, he and McCain sealed their agreement with a handshake. When McCain extended the same offer to Obama in 2008, the Democrat said that he found the notion "appealing" but then did little to make it happen. Since that time, McCain has repeatedly told aides what he has also said in public – that had Obama truly showed a determination to have a series of joint appearances, the campaign would not have degenerated to its current sorry state.

In fact, Obama responded to McCain's proposal—with a counter-proposal, to model the debates on Lincoln-Douglas rather than Goldwater-Kennedy. As far as I know, McCain just ignored this counter-proposal. In other words, McCain has been stewing over the fact that Obama

did not accept McCain's proposal in its entirety for four months; or, to put it another way, he's been stewing over the fact that the younger (and, in McCain's mind, unworthy) man did not accept McCain's terms without negotiation.

I find it interesting, then, that Draper doesn't note Obama's counter-proposal. It's tough to say whether it's just shitty journalism, whether Draper just internalized McCain's own myths, or whether he simply saw himself repeating what the McCain campaign either sincerely or manipulatively told him. In any case, the silence about Obama's counter-proposal shows how Draper's entire narrative takes McCain's claim to justifiable indignation uncritically.

More interesting still is the other significant detail Draper ignores: the McCain team's cynical lies immediately after the convention. Nowhere does Draper mention the insistent lies about the Bridge to Nowhere; nowhere does he mention the manufactured outrage over the lipstick on a pig comment. Instead, he pretends that Palin had a two and a half week honeymoon with the press, with no blemishes until (presumably) her utter ignorance showed in the Couric interview.

In the ensuing two and a half weeks (which surely felt longer to the Obama campaign), the Palin Effect was manifest and profound. McCain seemed, if not suddenly younger – after all, the woman standing to his side was nearly the same age as his daughter, Sidney – then freshly boisterous as he crowed, “Change is coming, my friends!” Meanwhile, Palin's gushing references to McCain as “the one great man in this race” and “exactly the kind of man I want as commander in chief” seemed to confer not only valor but virility on a 72-year-old politician who only weeks ago barely registered with the party faithful.

But just as you could make too much of Shanks's quiet coaching of Palin, you could also make too little of it. The

new narrative – the Team of Mavericks coming to lay waste the Beltway power alleys – now depended on a fairly inexperienced Alaska politician

Similarly, Draper suggests McCain just started going negative in October without having tried to mobilize resentment to protect Palin for the entire month of September.

In the period before the campaign's decision earlier this month to wage an all-out assault on Obama's character as the next narrative tactic, McCain was signaling to aides that it was important to run an honorable campaign. People are hurting now, McCain said to his convention planners as Hurricane Gustav whirled toward the Gulf Coast. It's a shame we have to have a convention at all. But because we have to do this, tone it down. No balloons, nothing over the top. When his media team suggested running ads that highlighted Obama's connection with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, McCain reminded them that he pledged months earlier not to exploit the matter, and John McCain was not about to go back on his word.

Again, I don't know whether this is just crappy journalism from Draper or whether he simply believes he was repeating the McCain story in good faith. But it entirely excises from his narrative the moment when McCain went from ignoring the press to actively attacking it, even while daring it to call him on his blatant, repeated lies.

Perhaps these two missing details don't affect Draper's ability to achieve his objective at all—he catalogs the six changing narratives the McCain team has believed it was telling about McCain, and that, in and of itself, tells the story.

Draper is much more explicit that the last big myth in this story—that the press was unfair to McCain—was Salter’s and Schmidt’s myth, not one he necessarily agreed with.

Salter and Schmidt had hoped that the mainstream press would warm to this new narrative. But the matter of which candidate had shown more acts of bipartisan daring failed to become Topic A. The two advisers – each of whom had friendly relations with the media but had grown increasingly convinced that Obama was getting a free ride – took this as further proof that today’s reporters were primarily young, snarky, blog-obsessed and liberal. To Schmidt’s and Salter’s minds, John McCain had always been honest and straightforward with the press, and the press in turn was not acting in good faith toward their candidate. As such it was now undeserving of McCain’s unfettered “straight talk.”

This point—and the debunking of Salter and Schmidt’s resentment toward the press—deserves much closer focus, because this is what the real story of the McCain campaign is. John McCain simply was not, himself, attractive enough to the American people—or even the Republican Party—to win the general election. So the campaign did more than just tell a (or rather six different) narratives. They began to lie—and really started telling doozies by the time Caribou Barbie strode onto the scene.

So while Draper’s article is interesting—particularly the details regarding the utter lack of vetting on Palin—what’s most interesting to me is the sustained self-denial about what was driving the campaign. I’m sure Draper’s sources believe this was fundamentally a story about the press mistreating a great man, about an upstart disrespecting his superior. But really, they seem totally unaware—or at least unforthcoming—about when it was that they just

started lying through their teeth.

And that lack of awareness is as much the story of the McCain campaign as Draper's six narratives.