

The Performance  
*of*  
Politics

*Obama's Victory and the Democratic  
Struggle for Power*



JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Imagining Heroes



CAMPAIGNS ARE ALWAYS ‘WHAT’S THE NARRATIVE OF THE RACE?’” an Illinois political consultant remarks in September 2007.<sup>1</sup> He is explaining to the *New York Times* why Barack Obama lost his first effort to enter the national scene back in the fall of 2000, when he had opposed incumbent Bobby Rush in a Chicago congressional race. Candidates and their advisors struggle to find their stories, and journalists spin their own narratives even as they evaluate candidates’ success at telling their own.

### Predestination and Redemption

Political stories are all about heroes. It is because Obama could not be a hero in north Chicago’s black community that he lost that long-ago congressional race. Bobby Rush had been an activist in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and a leader of the local Black Panther party. He had fought on behalf of an oppressed and vulnerable people against the white power structure, and he remains a hero to the African American community in Chicago’s south side. Narratives are elastic, however, and from the standpoint of the present, Obama’s defeat can be framed as a blessing in disguise. As time passes, new and more encompassing narratives can emerge. If Obama had won in 2000, the Illinois political consultant tells the *Times*, he would have remained a mundane everyday figure, “an African-American congressman” instead of the “transcendent” political figure he is becoming today. Only by losing could Barack Obama become a hero on the larger historical stage.<sup>2</sup>

Heroes rise above ordinary political life, and the narratives we spin about them allow us to understand how they are able to do so. Stories about heroes create meaning by looking back to the past from the present and by projecting the plot's next act into the future, all at the same time. In their earlier lives, heroes were tested and suffered, usually on behalf of something greater than themselves. In the present, however, their suffering and their causes will be redeemed. Unlike an actual flesh-and-blood person, who is materially rooted in time and space, the narrative character of a hero is not moved by a cause immediately preceding it but by a goal that is to come. The actions of a hero are caused by a meaning that becomes clear only after the heroic journey is complete. There is a purpose to a hero's life. It is this goal that defines an arc stretching from the past to the future via the present, moving the heroes and the greater causes for which they fight from earlier despair to contemporary redemption and on to future glory. Persons who become heroes are predestined to traverse this rainbow arch. This is what the plot to their story is all about.<sup>3</sup>

In 2007, Bobby Rush is serving his eighth term as a congressman from south Chicago. He needs to make sense of—to be able to tell a meaningful story about—the fact that he had earlier opposed and defeated the very same man who today offers historical salvation not only for the African American people but beyond as well. Rush creates this coherence by weaving a new narrative about Obama as a predestined hero. Obama had to suffer and be defeated, or else he and America's black community and perhaps even America itself could not now be redeemed. In telling the story of Obama's 2000 campaign and the dilemma Bobby Rush faces, the *Times* recounts the trials, tribulations, and ultimate goal of a hero's journey.

#### THE DOWNFALL

In his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Mr. Obama wrote: "Less than halfway into the campaign, I knew in my bones that I was going to lose. Each morning from that point forward I awoke with a vague sense of dread." [In that campaign] Mr. Obama's Ivy League education and his white liberal-establishment connections [had] become an issue. Mr. Rush told [the African American newspaper] *The Chicago Reader*, "He went to Harvard and became an educated fool. We're not impressed with these folks with these Eastern elite degrees." Mr. Rush and his supporters faulted him for having missed experiences that more directly defined the previous generation of black people. "Barack is a person who read about the civil-rights protests and thinks he knows all about it," Mr. Rush told *The Reader*. Mr. Obama was seen as an intellectual, "not from us, not from the 'hood,'" said Jerry Morrison, a consultant on the Rush campaign. [Obama mentor and former congressman Abner] Mikva said, "It indicated that he

[Obama] had not made his mark in the African-American community and didn't particularly have a style that resonated there."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the could not be a hero for Chicago's African American community in 2000, and Obama's campaign for Congress failed to resonate. He was defeated and humiliated. But this downfall was followed by a rise. The *Times* continues its story this way:

#### THE CANDIDATE MATURES

Mr. Mikva recalls telling him [Obama] about advice once given to John F. Kennedy by Cardinal Richard Cushing: "The cardinal said to him, 'Jack, you have to learn to speak more Irish and less Harvard.' I think I recounted that anecdote to Barack. Clearly, he learned how to speak more Chicago and less Harvard in subsequent campaigning." ... In March 2004, Mr. Obama won the Democratic primary for the United States Senate with nearly 53 per cent of the vote, racking up huge totals in wards he had lost to Mr. Rush in 2000. (Mr. Rush, still stung by Mr. Obama's challenge to him, endorsed a white candidate in the race....) Today, Mr. Rush, a practicing Baptist minister in his eighth term in Congress who is backing Mr. Obama's presidential candidacy, still seems to be ruminating about the Obama phenomenon with grievance and wonder.... "For what he is doing now, he didn't need to march against police brutality," Mr. Rush said [and] has an explanation for Mr. Obama's emergence after the dark days of 2000 as a political star four years later: [Obama] vanquished a field of multimillionaires, some more experienced and better known, and benefited from fortuitous domestic scandals that sidelined two opponents and left him facing a Republican widely seen as unable to win. "I would characterize the Senate race as being a race where Obama was, let's say, blessed and highly favored," Mr. Rush said.... "That's not routine. There's something else going on." What was he suggesting? "I think that Obama, his election to the Senate, was divinely ordered," Mr. Rush said, all other explanations failing. "I'm a preacher and a pastor; I know that that was God's plan. Obama has certain qualities that—I think he is being used for some purpose. I really believe that."<sup>5</sup>

#### Crisis and Salvation

In early June 2008, *Times* reporter Michael Powell explains that Obama "has the gift of making people see themselves in him."<sup>6</sup> Such identification allows collective

representation, the candidate's performance becoming so powerful that it creates fusion with an audience. To explain the source of identification, Powell evokes the miraculous, even eerie qualities of heroes and their relation to temporality. "Obama is a protean political figure," Powell suggests, "inspiring devotion in supporters who see him as a transformative leader." It is "as if there were a Barack-the-immaculate-pol quality to his rise." Employing allusive terms that evoke prophecy, Powell writes that Obama "has taken just 11 years to run the course from state senator to the first black presumptive nominee who holds thousands spellbound." The modern political journalist reaches for a narrative about supernatural qualities associated with premodern religious life. Hope for transcendence remains a vivid and powerful secular motif, and the idea of the hero is deeply imbedded in political campaigns.

In a *Times* report on the publication of comic books devoted to candidates Obama and McCain, the paper's tone is mildly ironic and "sophisticated." However, the prose style barely conceals the liberal newspaper's recognition that the stakes in the struggle for power are such as to suggest a parallel between the superheroes and contemporary presidential campaigns (figure 4.1).

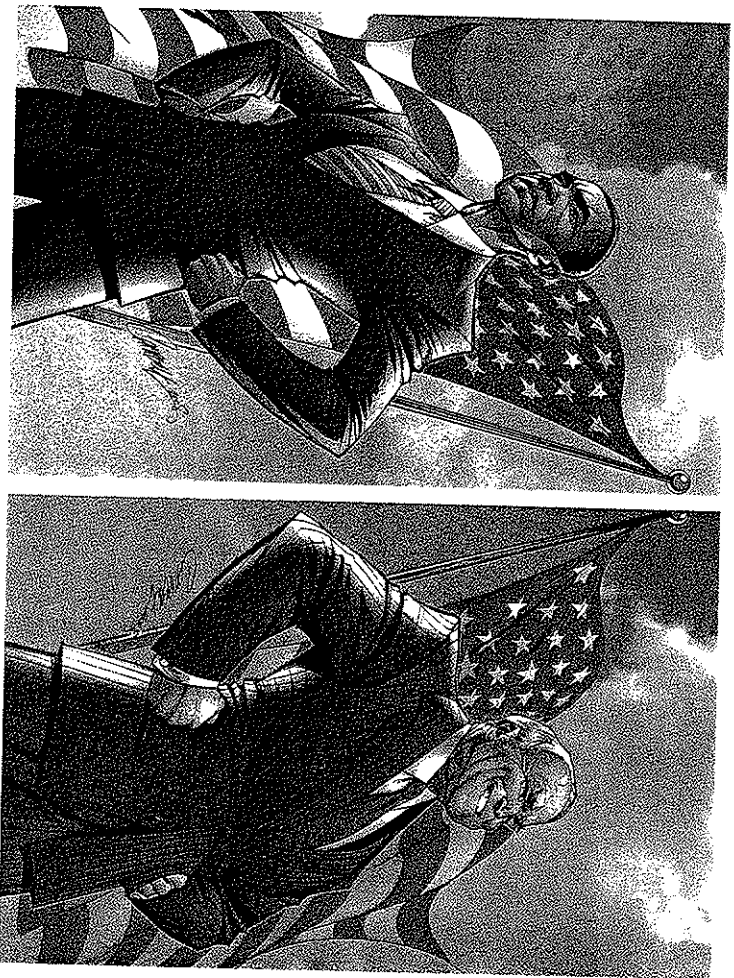


FIGURE 4.1. From *The New York Times*, "The Candidates, Comically Drawn," George Gene Gustines, July 22, 2008. (Illustrations: J. Scott Campbell/IDW Publishing)

#### COMPANY FOR BATMAN AND ROBIN

Comic books are filled with stories about protagonists who overcome seemingly impossible odds as they fight for truth, justice and the American way. Where better to chronicle the stories of Senators John McCain and Barack Obama and their campaigns for the White House? ... Each cover depicts its presidential candidate looking skyward. They each have a trace of color outlining their bodies: naturally, red for Mr. McCain and blue for Mr. Obama.<sup>7</sup>

Characters become heroes by overcoming great odds and by resolving what seem to be overwhelming challenges. Struggles for big-time political power are narrated in terms of crisis and salvation. According to those who would be president, Americans face a unique moment in our history. There are unprecedented dangers and opportunities; a world-historical crisis domestically and internationally threatens to derail the nation's triumphant, mythical history. America has fallen on tough times. The dream lies in tatters. The nation has fallen off the hill. With national collapse looming, the present moment is precarious and burdened with terrible significance. Desecrated and polluted—not least by the outgoing president and his administration—the nation must be purified. For this we need a hero. Only one man can save the day. If he is defeated, there will be apocalypse; if he wins, there will be salvation and transformation. Only by resolving the "crisis of our times" can heroes be made.<sup>8</sup> Not just survival but also transcendence and refunding are at stake. At the most critical early moment in his campaign for the Democratic nomination, late in the evening of November 10, 2007, Barack Obama climbed onto the stage in Des Moines, Iowa, at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner, two months before the Iowa caucus and just moments after Hillary Clinton had finished a speech earnestly highlighting her experience. Here is what Obama had to say:

We are in a defining moment in our history... Our nation is at war. The planet is in peril. The dream that so many generations fought for feels as if it's slowly slipping away. We are working harder for less. We've never paid more for health care or college. It's harder to save and it's harder to retire. And most of all, we've lost faith that our leaders can or will do anything about it. And that is why the same old Washington textbook campaigns just won't do in this election.<sup>9</sup>

#### Barack Obama on the Hinge of History

To become a hero, one must establish great and urgent necessity. A hinge is created in history and the candidate inserted into that break. Heroes are constructed

by shoehorning a political actor into world-historical time. It's about narrating time, about building a new temporality that is radically discontinuous, and about weighting the imminent break with immense significance. The hero's opponent is so dangerous that electing that person will plunge the nation into apocalypse. Rather than transcending the troubled present, history will be set in reverse. If the anthero is elected, the progressive arc of our collectivity will be broken, and we will no longer be able to move into future time and change for the better. Facing the millennium during the 1996 Clinton-Gore reelection campaign, the Democratic Party promised voters "A Bridge to the 21st Century."

The past is anticivil and dark, but the future will be good and bright. Jack Kennedy memorably announced in his 1960 inaugural address that "a new day is dawning," recalling the prowess of Olympic heroes with his proclamation that "the torch has been passed to a new generation." Half a century later, Barack Obama draws the same kind of bright, redolent line between sullied past and golden future. He presents himself as a force that mediates between darkness and light. He will purify the American project, pulling it from the past to the future and into the bright sunshine of a new day. The present is a hinge. "This is our time, this is our moment," candidate Obama declares not only in his postprimary speech on June 4, 2008, but over and over again as well. One week later, in a major economic address, Obama insists that his opponent, John McCain, is only nominally in the present and that his real attachment is to the past. "Mr. Obama said again that a McCain presidency would be a continuation of President Bush," the *Times* reports.<sup>10</sup> "We've been there once," Obama declares, and he assures his audience that "we're not going back." According to the *Times*, "Mr. Obama posed the choice between him and Mr. McCain as a fundamental one between the future and the past," and it describes this framing as "the ground on which he hopes to fight his campaign." The present becomes critical because it sits between polluted past and transformed future. "This is the choice we face right now," Obama proclaims to his audience, "a choice between more of the same... or change." It is not a matter of issues or ideology but of temporality. Voters must choose the candidate who can connect the present to the future. Rather than "an argument between left or right," Obama contends, "it is time to try something new." As the Democratic candidate sees it, McCain believes the nation is somehow already in the future: "He says we've made great progress in our economy these past eight years." If McCain is right, then the contrast between the Republican and the Democratic candidates is lost. There is no hinge. The present looks exactly like the past. Difference disappears. Meaning cannot be made.

From the very first days of his appearance on the American political stage, Barack Obama has presented a character perched on the very hinge of history. If his candidacy is arrested, he renounces his audience, he will have a moment of

role in turning the historical page. In a television ad that runs just two weeks before the election, Obama proclaims that we face a "defining moment in our history," invoking a great temporal urgency: "The question is not are you better off than you were four years ago—we all know the answer to that. The real question is will our country be better off four years from now?"<sup>11</sup> Obama's opponents—the critics of his political performances—have insisted on the deceptiveness of his character and the strategic nature of his plot. They are unable to deny, however, that for many Americans the Obama story does exert performative power and that the (Obama) character does display a hero's integrity.

In the July 21, 2008, *New Yorker* magazine, Ryan Lizza writes an exposé detailing what he depicts as the Machiavellian quality of Obama's Chicago years, the period stretching from Obama's 1991 post-law school arrival in the Windy City to his 2004 election to the U.S. Senate.<sup>12</sup> The article quickly becomes notorious, inspiring commentators to reach for Al Capone-style similes about "Chicago politics" and for metaphors about Obama as "fast Eddie." Lizza hopes his story will deflate Obama's hero narrative by pointing to "a realization among his supporters that superheroes don't become President; politicians do." Tellingly, these revelations about Obama playing Chicago-style politics emerge at the same time as the *Times*' reports on superhero "candidate comics." In fact, even as Lizza recounts Obama's climb upward through the nooks and crannies of Chicago politics, the *New Yorker* narrative suggests that the bedazzling story of a hero stuck to Obama like glue throughout this early phase of his political career. "Obama's rise has often appeared effortless," Lizza acknowledges, describing how his "breath-takingly rapid political ascent" and "lightning transition from Hyde Park to legislative to Presidential nominee" created a "zealous corps of campaign workers" who were "passionate" and "crazed."

The *New Yorker* narrates Obama's 1995 campaign for the Illinois state senate as the beginning of an arc stretching from darkness to light. Writing that Obama "was able to capture the imagination of some young African-Americans frustrated by their local leadership," Lizza quotes from a staffer recalling that first campaign:

You have to understand, it's 1995. It's the year after the Republicans have taken over control of Congress, and in Illinois all three branches of government were also controlled by the Republicans. So it was a really dark point. I was looking to be engaged in something that would mean something.

It is in this context of decline and weakness, Lizza explains, that on September 19, 1995, at a lakefront Ramada Inn in Chicago, the thirty-four-year-old Barack Obama announced, "I want to inspire a renewal of morality in politics." A well-

emerging Obama candidacy to the Democratic Party's earlier heroic past and to the young candidate's glorious future. It was "in this room," she declares, that "Harold Washington announced for mayor." Washington had been Chicago's first African American mayor. Mourned and beloved, he had died shortly after his 1987 reelection to a second term. Connecting the young candidate with the discourse of civil society, the political veteran announces that "Barack Obama carries on the tradition of independence in this district," prophesying that "his candidacy is a passing of the torch."

Twelve years later, when Obama announces his campaign for a much larger office, the hinge of history is still in full swing. In the final weeks of the presidential campaign, the conservative *Weekly Standard* provides this retrospective account of Obama's announcement, constructing an interpretive grid to explain why Obama is now on the verge of winning that race:

When Barack Obama announced his presidential candidacy in Springfield, Illinois, on February 10, 2007, he promised to change the practice of American politics. "This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams. It will take your time, your energy, and your advice—to push us forward when we're doing right, and to let us know when we're not." Obama told the crowd on that chilly day that he was running "not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation." He was particularly concerned with the way politicians run for office. He decried "the smallness of our politics" and "the chronic avoidance of tough decisions" and politicians who win by "scoring cheap political points." All of this, he said, had led voters to look away in "disillusionment and frustration." "The time for that politics is over," Obama said.<sup>13</sup>

Two months earlier in 2008, the liberal *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd observes candidate Obama's speech at the Victory Column in Berlin before a crowd of 200,000 people. Dowd reports that Berliners have christened Obama the "Redeemer" and "Savior" and how, according to the German press, French president Nicolas Sarkozy "was also Obamarized, as the Germans were calling the mesmerizing effect." She describes Obama's meeting the next day with Sarkozy "a moment of transcendent passion."<sup>14</sup>

One year before, in 2007, *Times* reporter Janny Scott interviews the campaign manager of Obama's losing 2000 congressional campaign. As I recounted earlier, he describes Obama's defeat to Scott as if it were a turning point in a pilgrim's progress. Because of Obama's shattering loss, the African American political aspirant had progressed from "thoughtful, earnest policy wonk/civil rights lawyer/con-

Another Obama friend and former state senator tells Scott that, because of that early loss, Obama had moved from an earthbound concentration on contemporary, concrete issues to the politics of transcendence, aspiration, utopia, and hope:

He stumbled on the fact that instead of running on all the issues, quote unquote, that [sic] hope is the real key. Not only the black community but less privileged people are looking for that hope. You don't have to talk about health care, you have to talk about "the promise" of health care. Hope is a pretty inclusive word. I think he is very good at selling that.

All of these former comrades of Obama, as well as those reporting on their observations, understand that Obama is presenting himself as a hero who promises salvation. They are wrong, however, to describe this merely as "performance." The promise of salvation has been there from the beginning, as real for Obama and his citizen audiences as any fictional or spiritual truth can be. Obama character has always promised big things. It stands on the hinge of history, in "the fierce urgency of now." Obama character inspires audiences to believe that they and their nation can be resurrected, that the mundane can be transcended, that, as the Democrat so eloquently promised in his speeches, it "is time, America, time for us to believe again!" Whether this is seen as making meaning or selling it depends on whether the arrow from the hero's bow has firmly entered into the citizen heart.

#### The Immortal Body

To successfully become a hero is to enter into myth. It is to cease being merely a mortal man or woman and to develop a second, immortal body.<sup>16</sup> The second body is an iconic surface, and contact with it conveys a powerful feeling of connecting with the idealized nation that lies just underneath. Because the hero's iconic body is symbolic and immortal, it will not die. It can be remembered no matter what happens to the biological woman or man. Most political figures cannot grow such second skin. They are respected or well liked and maybe even deferred to, but their public body is weak and insubstantial. Because they do not have a second skin, they remain politicians rather than myth. They are overshadowed, sometimes even winnified, by their opponents. Wounded in political battles, they reveal their mortal natures.

In 1960 Richard Nixon's five o'clock shadow, not properly covered by makeup, darkened and polluted the Republican candidate; this allowed Jack Kennedy to shine like a bright young god during the first nationally televised debate. In 1980 Jimmy Carter was damaged by Teddy Kennedy's late primary run and injured

further by the prophetic "The Dream Will Never Die" speech Kennedy delivered to the Democratic convention on the eve of Carter's nomination. In that televised oration, widely circulated later via record and tape, Kennedy declared himself the once and future king. A mere administrator by contrast, Carter faltered in the subsequent general election campaign, watching helplessly as the once mundane, even comic figure of Ronald Reagan grew a sacred and mythical second body during the course of that campaign. The immortal, second body of American liberalism sequestered itself inside the Kennedy mystique for three decades until the "Iion of the Senate" and his fairy-tale niece Caroline conferred the sacral blessing on Barack Obama himself.

#### The Suffering and Redemption of John McCain

For many years before he put himself forward as a candidate for president, McCain had embodied a story of sacrifice and redemption for the American people. In 1966 and 1967, as a U.S. Navy fighter pilot, he flew dangerous bombing missions over Hanoi, a city that was not merely the capital of North Vietnam but also, for many Americans, the heart of antidemocratic darkness. The cold war against communism was experienced by the vast majority of Americans as a hinge in history, a long twilight struggle that would decide the fate of all humankind. When John McCain was shot down over Hanoi in late 1967, it was not only his individual life but also this higher cause that was at stake.

By narrow circumstance, McCain did not die when his plane crashed into a Hanoi lake. He was, however, seriously injured and later brutally tortured and for five years submerged in a gulag of Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camps. During the early months of this imprisonment, McCain's suffering became widely known. As the son and grandson of navy admirals, his captivity presented a public relations bonanza for the Vietnamese, who interrogated him—in bandage and body cast—and distributed the film worldwide. As the brutal and tragic conflict in Vietnam wound down, the cause of the POWs, the American prisoners of war, heated up. They became a cause célèbre, idealized by many Americans as symbolic representations of the nation's anticommunist ideals and of the suffering that fighting for them entailed. When McCain was released along with the other POWs in 1973, his redemption transfigured the nation. "HANOI TO RELEASE ADMIRAL'S SON," proclaimed a huge banner headline in the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>17</sup> Still hobbling on crutches and resplendent in his gleaming white naval uniform, McCain was lauded by President Nixon and a grateful if weary nation in a celebration at the White House.

Staying on in Washington, D.C., McCain learned politics from the inside as a

reputation as a war hero into a series of successful political campaigns. In 1999, as prelude to his first run for the Republican presidential nomination, McCain published an autobiography depicting his youth and early years of imprisonment. "Whenever I am introduced at an appearance, the speaker always refers to my war record first," McCain acknowledged. "My public profile is inextricably linked to my POW experiences," he continued, and "such recognition has benefited my political career."<sup>18</sup>

*Faith of My Fathers*, written in the first person but coauthored with McCain's close friend and political advisor Mark Salter, narrates the story of a young man who was destined at birth to become a hero. Born into a long line of military men, a "martial lineage" traced "through many generations of our family."<sup>19</sup> McCain attended the U.S. Naval Academy as his father before him, yet finished near the bottom of his class and compiled a string of demerits for bad behavior. McCain recalls the "crude individualism" of his childhood and how he had been a "rowdy and impetuous young man."<sup>20</sup> Only in his thirties, after he had been shot down and come close to death, when he had suffered humiliation, powerlessness, and years of loneliness at the hands of his nation's enemies, did McCain discover the higher calling that would allow him to redeem himself and others in his postmilitary life:

When you're alone with your thoughts for years, it's hard not to reflect on how better you could have spent your time as a free man... I regretted much of the foolishness that had characterized my youth [and that] I hadn't worked harder at the Academy... I gained the insight, common to many people in life-threatening circumstances, that the trivial pleasure of life and human vanity were transient and insignificant. And I resolved that when I regained my freedom, I would seize opportunities to spend what remained of my life in more important pursuits... I thought glory was the object of war, and all glory was self-glory. No more. For I have learned the truth: there are greater pursuits than self-seeking. Glory... is not a prize for being the most clever, the strongest, or the boldest. Glory belongs to the act of being constant to something greater than yourself, to a cause, to your principles, to the people on whom you rely, and who rely on you in return.<sup>21</sup>

This narrative of courage, sacrifice, suffering, and redemption had an extraordinary impact on citizen audiences, powerfully amplifying the performative effect of McCain's hero story from three decades before. Advance reviews prepared by citizen audiences to read the book as a deeply affecting, archetypal narrative. *Kirkus* called it "impressive and inspiring, the story of a man touched and molded by

challenge." *Publishers Weekly* judged it "the most engrossing book to appear in a long time from a presidential candidate." After publication, the reviewers agreed. *Faith of My Fathers* became a *New York Times* bestseller, the newspaper's book reviewer suggesting that, even "if he never presents himself as a hero... it is impossible to read this book without realizing that a hero is what he is." According to *USA Today*, McCain's memoir was "hard to top and impossible to read without being moved," and the *Seattle Times* predicted that "by the end of this book you will undoubtedly like and admire John McCain."<sup>22</sup>

After McCain lost to George W. Bush in 2000, he and Salter authored a string of similar accounts. These kept the politician's hero character in the public eye, highlighting the redemptive arc that *Faith of My Fathers* first inscribed. With September 11, the invasion of Afghanistan, and the war in Iraq, the character of military hero became particularly powerful in the performances McCain projected to Republican audiences. It was in large part on the basis of this narrative promise that the senator launched his campaign for his party's nomination in 2008.

#### Achilles and Hector

In the presidential campaign, McCain played Achilles to Obama's Hector, even if the outcome of their epic confrontation inverted the tragic ending Homer earlier prescribed. The *Iliad* provides the mold for the Western hero story. Its major protagonist, the Greek warrior Achilles, was half god, half man. Achilles' antagonist, the Trojan Hector, was fully a human being, described by Homer as not simply a great warrior but also the champion of the civilization of Troy. The outcome of the Trojan War between Greece and Troy was decided by the battle between Achilles and Hector. As Achilles dragged Hector's body around the walls of Troy, Homer made it clear that might—not right—had won on the field that day. During the siege of Troy, Achilles had sulked in his tent because King Agamemnon had taken away his war prize, a woman named Briseis, and eventually joined the fight only out of the spirit of revenge for a fallen friend. Hector, though also a great fighter, was motivated much more by familial and ethical concerns. He worried about abandoning his wife and young children, and his decision finally to engage Achilles was made not because of blood lust but because of the desire to save his city:

Achilles' greatness is a greatness of force and of negation. He is different from other men by his greater capacity to deny, to refuse, to kill, and to face death... Hector, by contrast, is a hero [who] affirms all that Achilles denies... Hector is a human creature, with wife and child, parents and brothers, friends and fellow citizens. Achilles' acts are always true to his

shifting visions of himself; Hector has placed his life at the service of others.<sup>23</sup>

Even as they struggle for civil power, political heroes can be more and less democratic, centering their representative narratives more inside or more outside the promises and institutions of civil society. Obama presents himself as a decidedly democratic hero. The crisis he constructs and promises to transform is most of all an internal, domestic one, sparked by what he decries as massive violations of civil ties, dangerous corruptions of office obligations, and the growing inequalities that threaten the broad solidarity upon which democracy is based. Obama promises to overcome not only divisions internal to American society—"we are not red states or blue states but the United States of America"—but external ones as well. Like Hector, he is reluctant to make war on his nation's enemies and worries about the costs to hearth and home. Preferring to negotiate, Obama would employ common sense and goodwill to reach over boundaries that rest upon suspicion and reflect merely physical divides. Like Hector, Obama's most fervent obligations are to families and fellow citizens, to the civil sphere of the United States. Obama's mythical body molts from the iconic forms of Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King Jr., American heroes who promised civil repair and possessed the practical, political skills to carry them out.

The Obama hero addresses internal boundaries and divisions and promises to transcend intra- and international tensions and to expand inclusive solidarity. For John McCain it is a different story. His hero concentrates on the nation's external boundary. The suffering and redemption of the McCain hero comes from engagement in war and violence, from victory in military confrontations, not from struggles for civil repair. For the Republican candidate, being an American means living within the legally defined territory of the nation-state. For the Democratic protagonist, Americanism is defined by the moral boundary of the civil sphere, by the creed of liberty and justice for all. Obama's heroic ethic centers squarely on the discourse of civil society, emphasizing the significance not only of honesty but also of criticism, not only of respect but also of transparency, and not only autonomy but also a rough equality of social conditions for every human being.

McCain's heroic ethic is of a different sort. As a warrior hero, he struggles to maintain separations between inside and outside, not to overcome them, and he succeeds not by offering moral recognition but by securing physical domination. When the Republican candidate clinches the votes for his party's nomination in March 2008, the *Wall Street Journal* records the scene of a hero triumphant, but in a military, not a civil way, providing an implicit contrast to the hero then emerging on the Democratic side:



In his victory speech Tuesday night, John McCain ticked off his muscular foreign-policy plans and then, with clenched jaw, urged the rowdy crowd to “stand up and fight for America.” The Republican presidential nominee’s resolve will now be tested on a national stage. His record in Congress suggests that a McCain White House could assume a tougher posture overseas than has the current administration, which has itself been criticized as too bellicose. Sen. McCain has joked about bombing Iran, ruled out talks with North Korea and, earlier this week, condemned the new leader of Russia.... “He’s more confrontational, he’s more coercion, he’s more sticks,” said retired Air Force Maj. Gen Scott Graton, who advises Sen. Obama on foreign policy and national security. “It’s time to go back and do carrots.”... Sen. McCain has a long record of urging the use of force from North Korea to Iran. In 1994, he accused President Clinton of trying to appease North Korea over its nuclear program. “To get a mule to move, you must show it the carrot and hit it with a stick at the same time,” he wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*. Five years later, when the Clinton administration led a North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombing campaign against then-Yugoslavia, Sen. McCain was one of the loudest voices in the Senate urging the White House to prepare for a potential ground invasion.... Sen. McCain wrote in *Foreign Affairs* magazine last fall that, when it comes to Iran, “military action, although not the preferred option, must remain on the table.”... Sen. McCain, whose father, grandfather and sons served in the military, has also vowed to increase the size of the armed forces.<sup>24</sup>

Warrior heroes do not suffer and conquer for themselves. They, too, act on behalf of others. The McCain hero is selflessly committed to national solidarity. Certainly, honesty and respect are intrinsic to the ethic of the military hero. However, as the *Wall Street Journal* editorializes about McCain in the closing days of his campaign, “the former Navy pilot’s politics” revolve around “core convictions” of a distinctly noncivil kind.<sup>25</sup> The military virtues of “duty, honor and country” are McCain’s primary moral concerns. Courage plays the central role in his memoir, defined more in a physical than a moral sense. In *Profiles in Courage*, John Kennedy had lauded the courage of nonconforming conscience, the strength to go against one’s fellow citizens for the sake of moral right. In *Faith of My Fathers*, McCain admires the courage to stand with one’s fellows, to withstand violent blows for their sake. He writes that “the great test of character” is war and describes courage as “finding the will to act despite the fear and chaos of battle.”<sup>26</sup> Another cardinal virtue is loyalty, whether manifest in soldierly absorption in a band of brothers or in the deference and paternalism of which military hierarchies are

made. Portraying his father and grandfather as extraordinary warriors, McCain announces, on the very first page of his book, that “earning their respect has been the most lasting ambition of my life,” and when he lays out “the terms of their approval” he avers that these forefathers “were honest, brave, and loyal all their lives.” Duty and honor follow from courage and loyalty. Testifying to the virtue of a fellow prisoner who withstood the physical pain of torture and the moral temptation of appeasement, McCain writes that “no one I knew in prison, Army, Navy, Marine, or Air Force officer, had greater loyalty to his country or derived more courage from his sense of honor.”<sup>27</sup> All of these virtues are rolled together into the ethic of faith, which means accepting earthly and divine authority without fear or doubt. “Faith in God, faith in country, and faith in your fellow prisoners,” McCain avers, were “the three essential keys to resistance,” which “our senior officers always stressed” and which “we were to keep uppermost in our mind... when we were isolated or otherwise deprived of their guidance.”<sup>28</sup>

This is not to suggest that John McCain has problems with democracy. He presents himself as fighting on behalf of freedom and against dictatorship, as going to war not for primordial or particularistic values but for those of a civil and universalistic kind. He portrays his suffering inside military prisons as leading him to value political freedom even more strongly.<sup>29</sup> In the years following his release, McCain cultivated a maverick image, presenting himself as a rebel vis-à-vis the powers that be. Nonetheless, the public markers of McCain’s mythic identity were warrior ones, the wounds to his public and immortal body inflicted on the field of battle. The military can be a noble field of prowess, and from ancient Athens right up until today the civil sphere’s survival has, in critical historic moments, depended upon battlefield success. However, military prowess depends on violence and promotes primal hatred, actions and values that are antithetical to the civil behavior and the more universal forms of incorporation that define democratic life:

My grandfather, as combatants often do, needed to work up a powerful hate for his enemy. He once recommended of the Japanese “killing them all—painfully.” This is an understandable reaction to the losses and atrocities suffered at the hands of the enemy. But hate also sustains the fighter in his devotion to the complete destruction of his enemy and helps to overcome the virtuous human impulse to recoil in disgust from what must be done by your hand.<sup>30</sup>

When the *New York Times* writes that McCain’s memoir demonstrates why he deserves to be a hero, the reviewer describes the book as a “testament to the martial values of honor and patriotism.” The *Christian Science Monitor* observed that the memoir “gets to the core of those inefable qualities of wartime brotherhood

and self-sacrifice." While these qualities undoubtedly reach "far beyond common notions of 'patriotism,'" as the *Monitor* suggests, they are still values of a decidedly noncivil, if not antivil, kind.<sup>31</sup>

#### Danger and McCain's Military Hero

Candidate Obama periodically reminds his supporters that his Republican opponent is a genuine American hero and that he has "worn the uniform of our country with bravery and distinction, and for that we owe him our gratitude and our respect."<sup>32</sup> Why, as he struggles mightily to defeat him, does the Democrat seem so sanguine in offering this acknowledgment, so willing to confer on McCain a laurel wreath? It is, after all, precisely in the military field that the Obama character is most vulnerable, the very arena in which McCain has made his heroic name.<sup>33</sup> To answer this question, we must consider the social setting for military heroism and how it can change.

It was because the hinge of history had become a matter of military valor—of defending territory and the saving and taking of human life—that in the years after September 11 the heroic character of John McCain was able to move back onto center stage. Danger in the physical sense seemed close at hand. From the Afghan invasion onward, the American nation was deeply involved not in a metaphorical twilight war but in violence and killing on a significant scale. It was because grave physical danger became imminent that the McCain hero, forged decades earlier in the century before, no longer seemed so long ago or far away. For a military hero to be compelling, the world must be dangerous right now. For the military hero to put himself on the hinge of history, the enemy must be at the gates. For seven years preceding the presidential election campaign, the American nation had been, in the words of the *Weekly Standard*, "obsessed with national security." As the conservative journal rightly notes, "the *New York Times* carried more extensive coverage of the Iraqi elections in 2005 than statewide contexts in the United States," and "Khalid Sheikh Mohammad became a household name."<sup>34</sup> From the very beginning, this sense of imminent foreign danger deeply affected the Republican's primary campaign:

It is September, 2007, a Republican "town hall meeting" in a small white church in New Hampshire during the primary campaign in that state. Before a crowd of some 250 persons, John McCain walks briskly through an honor guard of saluting veterans. Returning their salute, the military veteran climbs briskly onto the stage. Behind him, wall-sized videos project scenes from his days as a prisoner of war. Grainy images follow one upon

the other, of American fighter planes dropping bombs amidst dark clouds of anti-aircraft fire, of Vietnamese in bamboo hats pointing their rifles at the captured McCain, of newspaper headlines announcing the heroic American prisoner's long awaited release. Here is McCain, as a prisoner of war, in the infamous Vietnamese propaganda film, looking up at his interrogators, prone on a table, bound in his cast, slowly and grimly responding to questions from his Communist captors. Today, in this political rally in a New England church four decades later, there is an atmosphere of military struggle, glory and sacrifice, suffering and redemption, solidarity, heroism, and the hierarchy of command. The Republican presidential candidate stalks stiffly around the stage. Shoulders hunched, fists clenched, brows furrowed, McCain announces to his audience that "the main issue, the single most important issue of the 21st century, is the war against radical Islam." He declares that "the question that must be decided in this primary, and this election, is who the best man is to be commander-in-chief!"<sup>35</sup>

Six months after this rally in New Hampshire, the narrative of martial heroism has carried McCain to victory in his fight for the Republican nomination. The *Weekly Standard* recalls his "remarks to an enthusiastic crowd in Dallas, Texas, on the March night he passed the 1,191 delegate mark needed to make him the GOP nominee."<sup>36</sup> It recounts how "McCain expected—or, perhaps, hoped—that national security issues would play a major role in determining the next president." In his speech that early spring night, "McCain defended the decision to remove Saddam Hussein, where 'our most vital security interests' are involved." He declared that "a mismanaged exit could result in sectarian conflict, even genocide" and "warned about terrorist attacks with 'weapons we are not to allow' terrorists to possess." The hinge of history was a military one, the nation's survival a physical matter. From such considerations, there could be only one, ineluctable conclusion: The next president needs to be a military hero. First and foremost, the next president must be a powerful commander in chief. Here is what McCain told the assembled crowd that day:

Presidential candidates are judged on their records, their character and the whole of their life experience. But we are also expected to concentrate our efforts on the challenges that will confront Americans on our watch and explain how we intend to address them. America is at war in two countries and involved in a long and difficult struggle with violent extremists who despise us, our values, and modernity itself.... The next president must lead an effort to restructure our military, our intelligence, our diplomacy, and all relevant branches of government to combat Islamic extremism.

Six months later, the *Weekly Standard* remains enthusiastic that narrating heroism in a military manner will bring victory for the Republican side. Five weeks after the risky nomination of Sarah Palin as vice president and three weeks into a dangerous financial crisis, the influential conservative journal reconstructs McCain's success vis-à-vis Obama in a distinctively martial way:

John McCain, restless and emotional, couldn't resist the temptation to join the battle to rescue our financial markets and save the economy. It was the biggest and most important fight around.... Being engaged in the action—in the arena—is where McCain always wants to be.... Obama, placid and professorial, had a different reaction to the fight over the bailout. [He] rejected the idea of putting his campaign on hold.... He returned to Washington reluctantly.... The contrast here is not only dramatic. It's unusually revealing about the two candidates and how they might act as president. There's an analogy here that captures the difference: the warrior and the priest. McCain the warrior, Obama the priest. (If "priest" seems confusing, substitute "professor.") McCain has been a player in every major fight, in war and in Washington, for more than four decades. As far back as 1962, he waited in Florida as a Navy pilot for the order to attack during the Cuban missile crisis. (The order never came.) As a senator, he's never stayed on the sidelines. As a candidate, he likes the rough-and-tumble and unpredictable turns of town hall meetings.... McCain, like a general changing his tactics on the fly, picked Alaska governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. The surprise move unnerved Obama and his campaign staff, and they spent several unproductive weeks taking potshots at Palin. McCain likes surprises and gambles. When his campaign was at its low point in 2007, he rebuffed the advice of his senior advisers and went on what he called a "no surrender tour," defending the unpopular war in Iraq.... In his acceptance speech at the Republican convention in August, McCain stressed that he's a fighter. "I don't mind a good fight," he said. "I fight for Americans. I fight for you.... "Fighting for you" fits perfectly with McCain's pugnacious persona. It's a warrior's message.<sup>37</sup>

In early October 2008, Senator Joe Lieberman, one of the Republican candidate's closest political and personal friends, rallies a crowd at a "McCain for President" storefront headquarters on Philadelphia's Main Line. "This is an extremely dangerous world we live in, the worst in my memory," Lieberman confides to the crowd. It is because "we are standing on the precipice" that Lieberman—once a Democrat and now nominally an independent—has decided to support John McCain for president:

I knew there was only one man I could support, somebody who has proved himself already in the worst conditions, proven his courage. We have stood together in every national security crisis, every challenge to our beloved country over the last forty years.<sup>38</sup>

Lieberman draws a direct analogy between McCain's Vietnam-era suffering and the nation's condition in 2008. He defines the past as a prelude to the extreme physical dangers of the present and suggests that only a military hero can lead the American people into the future.

#### From Danger to Obama's Hope

By late summer 2008, polling indicated that the representations of military and civil hero were nearly distributed between the respective Republican and Democratic sides. John McCain has succeeded in inhabiting the collective representation of military leader in the unfolding campaign. According to a *Wall Street Journal/NBC News* national telephone survey, when Americans were asked, "Who do you think would be better when it comes to being commander in chief," only 25 percent answered Obama, and more than twice that number, 53 percent, named McCain. Republican and Democratic candidates were given about equal marks for being "honest" and "straightforward," but a sharp contrast emerged in representations associated with civil repair and internal change. Barack Obama received twice the support of Americans (46 percent to 22 percent) responding to the question "Who do you think would be better when it comes to being compassionate enough to understand average people?" Almost three times the number of Americans (54 percent to 19 percent) identified Obama with "offering hope" and "optimism for the future," and four times as many were more likely to see the Democratic candidate as "likeable" than were those who responded with affection to McCain.<sup>39</sup> Two weeks later, a *New York Times/CBS* poll indicated an equally large Obama advantage (65 percent to 37 percent) in response to a question about which candidate was more likely "to bring change."<sup>40</sup>

The problem for McCain is that, as the campaign progresses, Americans' sense of the nation being in imminent danger declines. In early August, in response to a question about the crisis in Iran, an analyst at the Eisenhower Institute tells the *Wall Street Journal*, "I can't imagine very many Americans would support any kind of military role for the U.S."<sup>41</sup> One month later, as the Republican nominating convention gets under way, nearly two-thirds of Americans (66 percent) report themselves "bored" with the Iraq problem. Writing about McCain's criticisms of Obama's timetable for an Iraq withdrawal, the *New York Times* observes that "the

political debate over Iraq with Senator Barack Obama has become more about the past than about the way forward there” and that “neither Mr. Obama’s aides nor Mr. McCain’s expect the timetable for that withdrawal to be a major issue of disagreement as it was in the spring.”<sup>42</sup> Feelings of external danger are on the decline. It has been years since terrorism actually intruded into the American homeland, and domestic concerns outweigh foreign ones. In late August, Americans were asked what single issue “would be most important to your vote.” More than 40 percent answered “the economy,” more than Iraq (15 percent) and terrorism (9 percent) combined. Health care (11 percent) and energy, especially gas prices (14 percent), rounded out the five top American concerns.<sup>43</sup> War and violence are perceived as issues of the past, not the present. Characters can become heroes only if they stand at the hinge of history. Only if they solve immense problems in contemporary time can their victory provide a pathway to the future.

Conservative media express anxiety. “What John McCain is trying to do,” the *Wall Street Journal* reports in mid-August, “is to remind people of what he’s been telling them all along: ‘It’s a dangerous world out there.’”<sup>44</sup> Democrats express hope. In his speech accepting the vice-presidential nomination, Senator Joe Biden suggests “the choice is clear.” The nation needs “more than a good soldier.” It requires a “wise leader” who “can deliver the change everybody knows we need.”<sup>45</sup> Three weeks later Biden feels confident enough of the shifting tide to assert that paying taxes is “patriotic,” linking nationalism to the civil rather than the military scene. McCain resists, replying that “raising taxes isn’t patriotic” and that it is “not a badge of honor” but “just plain dumb.”<sup>46</sup> Badges of honor should be reserved for military heroes, for real patriots, not handed out to champions of civil repair in mundane domestic life.

Conservatives sense that the background undergirding their decade-long electoral success is fading away. They cannot choose a different kind of hero candidate, but perhaps if they rewrite their nominee’s script, they can transform the manner in which their figure will be seen. Strategists had already begun to throw out suggestions for a midcourse correction in springtime and early summer. After McCain had secured the nomination and begun to direct his performances to general election audiences, some conservative commentators noticed that the story of the warrior hero was playing to less effect. In response, suggestions were offered that McCain representation should return to the maverick image that had helped balance his military character with domestic concerns in earlier days. McCain and his advisers resisted these suggestions. During the summer months, they tried to combat the Obama hero by deflating him as a celebrity. It was only as the summer turned into fall that they realized the extent of their mistake.

In early September, during the first days of the national convention, Republican political leaders continue to extol their nominee as a military hero. President

Bush reminds the convention’s layered audiences that “we live in a dangerous world.” From the “lessons of September 11th” Americans have learned that “to protect America we must stay on offense.” Senator Lieberman declares that “when others wanted to retreat in defeat from the field of battle . . . McCain had the courage” not to accept defeat. McCain’s former primary opponent Mike Huckabee recounts the Republican nominee’s suffering as a prisoner of war and links his war injuries and sacrifice to the convention theme emblazoned behind the speaker’s podium—“Country First.” Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, the hero of 9/11, praises McCain as “a *Top Gun* kind of guy.” Declaring that McCain had “proved his commitment with his blood,” Giuliani promises the Republican audience and the television viewers that “we will be safe in his hands.” Vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin looks back to the Vietnam confrontation and recalls how McCain had been there “at a crucial hour for our country.” Praising “the caliber of the man” and “his sheer guts,” she contrasts him with Obama, “a man who can give an entire speech about our wars and never mention the word ‘victory’ except when he’s talking about his own campaign.” There’s “only one man in this election who has ever actually fought for you, in places where winning means survival and losing means death.”<sup>47</sup>

McCain begins his acceptance speech by placing his character inside these martial themes. He declares “I fell in love with my country when I was a prisoner in someone else’s,” adding, “I wasn’t my own man anymore. I was my country’s.” The Republican candidate soon segues from war to civil matters, though he does not surrender military metaphors and heroic themes. Describing himself not as a bad-boy maverick but a “restless reformer,” McCain proclaims that he and Sarah Palin are the “true agents of change.” He issues a “warning” to the “old big-spend-ing, do-nothing, me-first, country-second Washington crowd.” He will “drain that swamp,” he promises, and he calls on “insurgents seeking to topple the establishment” to follow his lead.<sup>48</sup>

The Republican’s narrative shift from military to domestic heroism does not go unnoticed. In its coverage of McCain’s acceptance speech, the *Times* subhead describes “A Bid to Seize Change Theme from Rival.”<sup>49</sup> Even as the *Wall Street Journal* maintains that “Sen. McCain has always cast himself as a different kind of politician,” the conservative paper acknowledges that “only since his convention has he embraced the word ‘change’” and that only now do “McCain and his running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, regularly talk about change on the stump.”<sup>50</sup> The *Journal* claims that “challenging his own party” has always been a “piece of McCain’s story,” but it acknowledges that after the convention the “campaign is putting it at the center of its message.”

This fundamental shift in narrative framing is too little because it is too late. What has been central to the Republican candidate’s message is neither civil

challenge nor social change. John McCain is Achilles, not Hector. It is as a military warrior that he has won his fame and also how, two months from now, he will lose the campaign.

#### The Hero's Shadow

Being the right kind of hero when the struggle for power reaches its dramatic zenith is a matter of planning and performative power. It is also a matter of contingency—of just plain dumb luck. Once a political figure's hero character is formed, it is history that decides whether it will fit with that particular time. But there is also a more universal problem that heroes face regardless of the specifics of their situation. It's the problem of hubris. All heroes have their shadow, a negative other whose inverted attributes the bright light of their glory keeps hidden in the shade.

Heroes must be modest. They cannot be seen as overreaching, as trying to be a hero instead of simply and naturally being one, as wanting to be glorious instead of simply wanting to be the (heroic) person they really are. For the Greeks, this was a matter of distinguishing heroes from gods. When heroes try to become gods, they are destroyed. Hubris is the stuff of tragedy. It reveals a fundamental character flaw, one that triggers an action that brings the hero down from the heady heights of victory to the numbing depths of defeat. "Do you see how it is the living things that exceed others in size that the god strikes with lightning and will not let them show their grandeur, while the little ones do not itch the god to action?" Artabanus warns the Persian king in Herodotus's *History*: "Do you see how it is always the greatest houses and the tallest trees that that the god hurts his bolts upon? For the god loves to thwart whatever is greater than the rest. [He] does not suffer pride in anyone but himself."<sup>51</sup>

Modesty is a most civil quality, one that can allow even the military hero to play a constructive role in building the cooperative ties that make a democratic life. Conceit and arrogance endanger the civil sphere, encouraging superiority rather than equality, secrecy rather than openness, domination rather than reciprocity. So in the struggle for democratic power, when hubris brings heroes to their knees, it also makes them unqualified to represent the civil sphere. Hubristic heroes would be a distinct danger if they were allowed to take power inside the state.

Just before the outbreak of the financial crisis, with the outcome of the democratic struggle for power still very much in doubt, an influential editorial writer for the *Wall Street Journal* compares the heroic characters of the competitors in precisely this way. Reaching back to their published autobiographies, he narrates the modesty of the Republican candidate. He asserts that McCain's imprisonment gives him a cultural advantage because it suggests humility and equality:

Authority that is pre-humbled, as it were, has the tactical edge. John McCain's ordeal in Hanoi doesn't only demonstrate his heroism and patriotism. It portrays his humiliation and the shattering of his ego, as Sen. McCain himself has stressed. The terrible image of Sen. McCain being beaten without mercy in some filthy torture chamber is an image of powerful authority—a national politician, a United States Senator—being made to bend to the higher power of malevolent necessity. It is an image that feeds contemporary democracy's leveling maw.<sup>52</sup>

The conservative essayist attacks the Obama character, by contrast, as the very embodiment of elitist conceit:

Sen. McCain is not above us, [his] carefully crafted story tells us, he is not on the elevated level of [such] articulate, intellectually aloof, Ivy-education politicians [as] Sen. Obama... whose equally crafted autobiography tells us a tale of youthful indecision, wandering, mild drug use and eventual redemption as a privileged young man working among the poor and disenfranchised... Sen. Obama still struggles with the sin of pride, he tell us with his confident grin and his air of perfect poise. You could be forgiven for thinking that he is proudly displaying his scorn for his own oversized pride. Sen. McCain, on the other hand, confesses, with his lean, Bogartian mouth set in a near-grinace, that "I've been an imperfect servant of my country for many years."

Liberal critics turn the shadow of the hero back upon the Republican candidate himself. They accuse McCain of anticivil hubris, describing his virtuously modest self-narration as a put-on, a deceptive manifestation of barely camouflaged conceit. One month after the *Wall Street Journal's* effort to deflate the Obama hero, a lengthy *New York Times* profile of McCain picks apart the Republican's presentation in exactly this way:

For 25 years after his release from a North Vietnamese prison, Senator John McCain tried to build a reputation as more than a famous former captive. "I never want to be a professional P.O.W.," he often told friends. He refused to let his campaigns use pictures from his incarceration, and he never mentioned his torture. "When somebody introduces me like, 'Here is our great war hero,' I don't like it," Mr. McCain complained in a 1998 interview with *Esquire* magazine. "Jesus," he said, "it can make your skin crawl." Mr. McCain's impatience with his war story soon changed, however, when he became not only its protagonist but also its author. His 1999 memoir, *Faith of My Fathers*, for the first time put his camp ordeal at the center of his public persona. In its pages, he recalled the experience as... the origin of

a drive "to serve a cause" larger than himself. . . . In interviews and speeches, Mr. McCain has increasingly described his life in the book's language and themes, and never more so than during his current campaign. [Some] friends say they marvel at how heavily the McCain campaign relies on the chastened-hero image created by *Faith of My Fathers*. . . . Robert Timberg, a marine wounded in Vietnam who became Mr. McCain's biographer and admired his memoir, said the John McCain he knew 15 years ago would never have suggested that he was more patriotic than a rival the way the senator has in attacking his Democratic opponent, Senator Barack Obama. "Political campaigns have a way of distorting reality and turning political candidates into caricatures of themselves."<sup>53</sup>

A liberal columnist for the *Times* claims that, while candidate McCain put the "spirit of the warrior on full display," he "never considered the huge costs of war," the down-to-earth civil and human side as compared to the glory that elevates the military hero and state. The *Journal* worries that the McCain hero errs on the military side. It quotes a warning from one academic that "you can overplay your hand and come across as too belligerent for your own good." The newspaper interviews another expert on the Republican's insistent emphasis on military danger, quoting his observation that "probably, for a lot of voters, it would reinforce the idea that some people already have that perhaps McCain is a little bit too eager" for a fight.

Achilles loved war for its own sake; Hector fought for the sake of defending civic life. However, the shadow of hubris is hardly confined to military heroes. As the *Journal's* critique demonstrates, civil heroes, too, can fall victim to immobility and conceit. Indeed, as they come closer to the ideal of the democratic hero, they become ever more vulnerable to the melodramatic tension between virtue and vice. As Obama comes so powerfully to occupy the hero character during the heat of the campaign, pushing the threat of military danger off to the side, his shadow became a critical preoccupation. He is continually represented as barely controlling a bulging hubris not only for his conservative critics but also for those who root for his candidacy from the liberal side. In early profiles on Obama in the summer of 2007, the *Times* quotes a former Republican state senator from Illinois, who observes, "He is a very bright but very ambitious person who has always had his eyes on the prize, and it wasn't Springfield."<sup>54</sup> Obama's principal mentor during his time in the Illinois legislature reveals something similar:

"He said to me, 'You're now the Senate president.'" Mr. Jones recalled. "You have a lot of power! I said, 'I do?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Tell me what kind of power I have?' He said, 'You have the power to make a U.S. senator.' I said, 'I do?' He said, 'You do.' I said, 'If I've got that kind of power, do you know of anyone that I can make?' he said, 'Yeah. Me.'"

Bobby Rush, Obama's former opponent, describes Obama as "blinded by his ambition": "Obama has never suffered from a lack of believing that he can accomplish whatever it is he decides to try. Obama believes in Obama."<sup>55</sup> One year later, a *Times* reporter observes that, while Obama projects "a message in keeping with the humility he tries to emphasize," the candidate's "uncanny self-assurance and seemingly smooth glide upward have stoked complaints from his critics and his opponents . . . that he has not spent enough time earning and learning, that his main project in life has been his own ascent."<sup>56</sup> While Obama "tries to assure" working-class white audiences he and they "have much in common," the reporter caustically comments that "his comparing himself to Joshua and Lincoln can belie his point."

It is the decreasing relevance of the military hero, not so much its hubris, that threatens John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign, compelling the belated effort to shift the Republican's narrative over to the more civil side. As a Democratic civil hero Obama does not face this problem; his character is much more attuned with the national domestic narrative in 2008. What endangers Obama is the hero's shadow, which I have just described. In the summer of 2008, the Republicans managed to frame the Obama character as a celebrity, an arrogant *would-be* hero who is famous not for having accomplished anything but merely for fame itself. Obama's extraordinary performance during the Democratic convention at the end of August, as well as the emergence of the "Palin effect," brought an end to the Republicans' hubris-celebrity campaign. McCain tried to repackage himself as a maverick hero, an antestablishment agent of change who could also win a good fight. Maverick and military coexisted, but they did not mix. McCain's failed performance at civil heroics during the financial crisis was the icing on the cake.<sup>57</sup>

In the end, what most deflates McCain's heroic character is the bitter fact of defeat itself. If it is true that one must be a hero to be successful in the struggle for power, it is also the case that victory in that struggle makes one a hero indeed. By late October, when McCain begins to seem destined for defeat, the *Weekly Standard* warns against the imminent logic that defines hero stories, regretting how "in search of a narrative, the press constantly seeks to reveal the ending and name the hero before the story has reached its climax."<sup>58</sup> The conservative journal warns that entertaining the possibility of McCain's eventual defeat will powerfully undermine the symbolic power of the Republican campaign. For the result of "a losing campaign" is that "heroes [are] transformed by fickle voters into forgotten minor characters."

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Working the Binaries



**M**EANING IS DIFFERENCE, AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY MUST BE understood in exactly this way. Making oneself pure, polluting one's opponent—this is the stuff of which political victory is made.

Democracy rests upon the viability of a distinctive and independent social sphere, one defined—not by money, power, religion, intelligence, ethnicity, or family—but by broader solidarity of a more civil kind. Insofar as social solidarity is civil, political victory cannot be won by appealing to bigotry, dogma, or family ties. Insofar as such broad solidarity is institutionalized, state power cannot be gained by force or fraud, violence or coercion.

If democracy puts such aggression beyond the pale, however, it does so in a subtly contradictory way. The nonviolent character of democratic conflict is harshly agonistic. This is the irony that sits at the center of democratic society. Only people who are deeply believed to be civil can generate the trust and respect upon which democratic cooperation depends. Only these kinds of persons deserve to win electoral campaigns. Those who contend for power and are not believed to be civil deserve to lose. If they seem dishonest or irrational, domineering or def-erential, then they might support institutions of an authoritarian kind. We know ahead of time that we cannot allow such persons to gain control over the state.

As Republican staffers prepare Sarah Palin's unveiling at the party's convention, they know that her daughter is carrying an illegitimate child. Public knowledge might undermine the vice-presidential nominee's clarion call for responsibility and independence, not to mention her more narrowly constructed case for religion and "family values." The Republican campaign team decides to keep the information secret, delaying the revelation until after Palin's acceptance

speech. Explaining to reporters that “we are going to flush the toilet” on Labor Day, a senior adviser to Palin reveals the symbolic power of moral impurity on the political scene.<sup>1</sup> When, in the weeks following, Palin’s civil stature does become subject to relentless attack, Republicans respond by raining polluting attacks on the other side. A former chief strategist to President Bush explains, “McCain folks realize if they can get this thing down in the mud, drag Obama into the mud, that’s where they have the best advantage to win.”<sup>2</sup> For those who struggle for power, symbolic pollution must at all costs be avoided, yet it must energetically be attributed to the other side.

As campaigns work the binaries, they try to simplify the meaning of every issue that comes up, bringing it into semiotic alignment with one side or the other of the great divide. Candidates are purified so that their characters can be folded into heroic narrative arcs of a democratic kind. Hillary Clinton comes to symbolize equality and mobility, wisdom and maturity, a modern enlightened woman breaking the glass ceiling. Barack Obama becomes the great emancipator. Calm and reasonable, he is a black Abraham Lincoln promising a more profound and expansive solidarity. John McCain is the wounded prisoner of war who breaks the bonds of enslavement and comes back as a corruption-fighting maverick. He bucks social pressures and material party inducement to do what he believes is moral and right.

There is obviously a paradox here. While democratic citizens are united in the binary logic of such symbolic thinking, they never can agree on which ideology, which party, and which candidate actually belongs to the civil or the uncivil side. Yet, by election time, this is exactly what they must decide. With a plurality or majority of their votes, citizens say one candidate is “civil enough” to be trusted with state power. To convince enough people of this truth is the aim of every political campaign.

#### The Presumptively Rational Voter

Citizen voters make the crucial decision about the civil and uncivil qualities of candidates. Yet this voting public as such is not physically active in the democratic struggle for power. Democracy is representative not only in the exercise of power but also in the struggle for it. It is a few individuals and parties who vie for power, and their campaigns are directed by political staffs, energized by organizations and associations, and fueled by enormous flows of money. Citizen voters participate in the struggle for power as viewers. They play an essential role as the democratic performance unfolds, for it is directed at them. As the audience for the struggle for power, citizens are culturally constructed, imagined as possessing great intelligence and unquestioned integrity. Such idealized citizens constitute the virtuous

public that every candidate must engage. It is difficult to gain approval from this thinny and demanding audience. Its emergent preferences are monitored continuously throughout political campaigns and possess extraordinary subjective power. Collective sentiment is not visible in itself. It becomes visible in the form of attributions. In newspapers and blogs and on television there are continuous reports about what the public is thinking. In opinion polls, samples are published that represent opinion in the civil sphere—the “will of the people”—through statistical techniques. By these rhetorical and technical means, voters become imaginatively central to the struggle for power even if they are not physically copresent. Voter sentiment is projected by media of communication, and it becomes a central driving force in political campaigns.

Social critics of every ideological stripe have for centuries laid into the voting public in ferocious ways, accusing them of being lazy, prejudiced, conformist, or just plain dumb. If the voter audience were consistently portrayed in such a pejorative manner, democracy would be in a difficult fix. Rather than being consulted about their opinions, such insipid, biased, and unreliable creatures would have to be controlled—for their own good and the good of others—by powerful and coercive states.<sup>3</sup> Looking empirically at how contemporary voters are imagined during political campaigns makes it clear, however, that those who struggle for power rarely speak publicly of voters in such disparaging ways. Voters are projected as rational, honest, independent, and capable of decisions that are wise. Like the candidates themselves, they are discursively constructed in terms of the binary discourse that sustains the civil sphere. Unlike the candidates, however, voters are primarily conceptualized in positive terms.

Voters are imagined in terms of the discourse of liberty. If this is myth, it is a fiction upon which democratic truth depends. Because voters are conceived as enlightened citizens, it becomes inconceivable that they can make mistakes of an egregious, antidemocratic kind. In any particular campaign season, voters might be said to be angry, depressed, happy with the status quo, or anxious about the future. However, such passions are taken as expressions of their autonomy, of their rock-solid sense of reality, of their commitment to the public interest upon which American democracy rests. Sometimes voters do elect demagogues and liars. It is believed, however, that they have done so not because they are themselves weak or dishonest. It must have been the case, rather, that they were knowingly and irresponsibly misled by the “other” side. Provided with false or inadequate information, voters have been unable to act on their best instincts and unable to perceive the general will, to act upon what Tocqueville called their “self-interest rightly understood.”<sup>4</sup>

In the fervid days after Sarah Palin’s debut on the American political stage, the situation begins to look grim for the Democratic side. The self-described hockey mom is a fresh new face; she presents herself as an independent reformer, a champion



of civil repair who stands up for the average, undaunted American person in every political fight. Polls show Palin gaining surprisingly wide and enthusiastic support beyond her conservative base—from working mothers, conservative white men, and independents alike. Worried Democrats demanded that Obama do difference better, that he go after his opponents more “aggressively,” not be so “mild-mannered,” and find a tone less “professor” than “prosecution.”<sup>35</sup> Eventually Obama does change, and the media become engaged with Palin as well. However, the Democrat’s initial reaction to Palin’s rise is to argue that the shifting poll numbers do not actually indicate what American voters feel or believe. Against Palin’s claims for her civil achievements, Obama declares, “[Y]ou can’t just make stuff up” and that “you can’t just recreate yourself.” The reason that candidates can’t do these things, he explains, is that “the American people aren’t stupid.” A few days later, a *Times* editorial seconds this expression of rock-bottom belief in the virtue of American voters. In choosing Palin, McCain has demonstrated himself to be “shockingly irresponsible,” but, even worse, the Republican candidate’s choice “shows a contempt for voters.”<sup>36</sup> After Palin’s polls go south, the *Times* attributes these shifting numbers to the voters’ intrinsic rationality and good sense—the polling “indicates that the number of Americans who think she is not fit [has] increased.”<sup>37</sup> Palin has bungled her television interviews and her vice-presidential debate. “Voters have been guided by” these facts, the *Times* explains, and their opinions have changed accordingly; they now express their civil virtue in a more anti-Palin way.<sup>38</sup>

### Primary Myth

There is no better illustration of this cultural trope of the American voter than the rhetoric-framing presidential primary campaigns. Primaries are intraparty contests that unfold state by state during the first six months of every election year. Their outcomes largely decide which candidates are allowed to represent their political party in the general election in November. Whether delegates are distributed by winner-take-all or more proportionally, each primary contributes to the overall delegate count.

Every fourth year, “seven days or more,” according to New Hampshire law, before any “similar election” can be held in any other state, Democrats and Republicans compete in the first primary of the presidential campaign. The New Hampshire primary is as much myth as math. On Park Street in New Hampshire’s capital city of Concord, the New Hampshire Political Library memorializes the rhetoric and iconography of the state’s democratic rite. The library’s website describes the special exhibit mounted at the shrine for the critical months of the 2007–2008 primary season.

**New Hampshire: A Proven Primary Tradition**  
The Tuck Library, 30 Park Street, Concord, NH Saturday, September 8,  
2007—Saturday, May 24, 2008

A new exhibition presented by the New Hampshire Political Library and the New Hampshire Historical Society titled *New Hampshire: A Proven Primary Tradition* explores the impact New Hampshire’s primary has on the national presidential nominating process and examines how the state’s political culture and traditions have shaped its first-in-the-nation role. Including more than 260 objects, photographs, and archival materials, the exhibit will engage visitors of all ages through stories, videos, and interactives.

Those who physically show up at the special exhibit receive an elegantly formatted, thickly papered, five-color pamphlet, *New Hampshire: The Time-tested Presidential Primary Proving Ground*. Every four years, those who would be president must campaign up and down the state of New Hampshire, speaking in homes, schools, shopping centers, storefronts, small groups, and on street corners as well. *Proving Ground* explains why: It puts a discursive sheen on the so-called retail politics that unfolds over the hectic quadrennial rite. Offering testimony to America’s faith in the rationality, honesty, independence, and vigor of the democratic voter, the pamphlet serves double duty as a public-relations effort to keep New Hampshire’s pole position in the primary campaign. *Proving Ground* codes New Hampshire voters in the most idealized terms and raises the specter that anticivil disaster would ensue if the state’s privileged primary position were ever to be pushed aside. New Hampshire voters challenge authority, do their homework, and demand to be informed. From the time of the American revolution, democracy in America has always depended upon their stewardship, virtue, and discerning power. Passages from the *Proving Ground* pamphlet are reproduced here.

### New Hampshire

*The Presidential candidate stands before a crowded room, nervously anticipating tough questions on his newly unveiled economic plan. His plan is apparently familiar to some in the audience, as he sees copies dog-eared from close readings. The questions, he knows, will be pointed—and the questioners will expect real answers, not political spin. He takes a deep breath.*

(continued)

A press conference in Washington, D.C.? A meeting of the candidate's economic advisors? No: It's a living room in New Hampshire, six months before the first Presidential primary.

*And the Presidential selection process is just beginning.*

EVERY FOUR YEARS, prospective candidates and informed citizens across America look to New Hampshire, home of the first primary in the Presidential electoral process. . . . Before going national, campaigners must prove themselves here, face-to-face with knowledgeable, dedicated, and discerning voters.

Is this the best process? Are the nation's interests served by having New Hampshire go first in the primary lineup? . . . The compelling case for New Hampshire derives from this state's well-established conditions and proven credentials that no other state can replicate.

#### A HIGHLY INFORMED ELECTORATE

*Knowledgeable voters:* That's what Presidential hopefuls encounter in New Hampshire. Months before the primary, the state's voters are attending meetings with the candidates, listening to speeches, reading reports, and sorting through the issues they believe important.

Consider these representative statistics: Polls taken during the primary season show that 50% of New Hampshire voters actively seek out information on one or more of the candidates. More than 25% say they have attended a candidate's rally or information session. And an amazing 25% report that they have met at least one of the candidates *in person*.

The local media in New Hampshire do their part as well. Newspaper, radio, and television coverage of Presidential candidates is thorough, energetic, and equitable—just as New Hampshire's informed citizenry expects.

It's the last chance we, and the American public, get to see true hand-to-hand politics. I can drive from town to town and watch candidates go to local halls and answer questions from citizens for an hour. From now on [in the election], access will be drastically reduced. The candidates enter a bubble. They land on airport tarmacs, in tight scenarios controlled by the campaign. It's such a richer story when they interact with real people, not an audience constructed by the campaign. It's a great process to watch, and it works.

—Tim Russert, NBC News

That's the thing I loved about New Hampshire. They owed the country a good decision and they were determined to give everybody a listen.

—President Bill Clinton

I am of the firm belief that New Hampshire is and always will be first in this process. . . . The voters up here. . . they ask tough questions. These are serious times and people are expecting the candidates to talk in a serious way with them, and those that don't are going to be shuffled out very quickly.

—David Broder, *The Washington Post*

New Hampshire is a bastion of independent thinking. Nobody tells them what to do. They make up their own minds.

—Sen. Bill Bradley, 2000 candidate

#### AN UNUSUALLY ENGAGED CITIZENRY

*Record Turnout.* Twice the national average. Phrases like these tellingly describe the voting in New Hampshire. The state consistently records greater participation in both primary and general elections than most other states. One expert calls this "the active stewardship of New Hampshire voters. . . . Some observers depict New Hampshire as "a hyperpolitical state," where being engaged is an ingrained civic duty. No other state can match New Hampshire's *per capita* voter engagement.

#### A UNIQUE POLITICAL CULTURE AND TRADITION

More than two centuries ago, England's King George III learned the hard way about the political involvement of New Hampshire colonists. From the tough-minded revolutionaries who declared "live free or die"—and then backed it up on the battlefield of Bunker Hill—to the unpaid citizen legislature of today, New Hampshire has a long tradition of political activism. This tradition translates into a style of participatory democracy unrivaled elsewhere in the United States.

#### A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

. . . Thanks to the state's modest size—it's just 100 miles at its widest point and only 200 miles from north to south—the 234 independent communities that

(continued)

make up New Hampshire are accessible to candidates. This proximity puts candidates in touch with a wide range of voters. Because these new voters are already informed and engaged, candidates readily find willing audiences.

#### AN IDEAL MILIEU FOR ASSESSING CANDIDATE READINESS

Over the years, many candidates, including sitting Presidents in both parties, have said much the same thing. For these candidates, New Hampshire has presented an invaluable learning opportunity.

What do they learn? How to speak directly to real people. How to listen to citizens. How to convince and energize discerning voters in everyday venues. Manufactured images and slick pre-packaged messages don't play well in New Hampshire.... Answering questions on a Saturday morning at the town hall takes you much further than dispensing sound bites at the airport.... For Presidential hopefuls, it's not just about winning in New Hampshire. It's about *listening and learning* in New Hampshire.

With the New Hampshire Presidential Primary receiving thorough national—and now global—coverage, the Granite State has become an essential proving ground for Presidential hopefuls. Citizens across the country watch as candidates meet with individual voters on the street, in town halls, and on college campuses.

Those who struggle for democratic power must show themselves to be studiously respectful of voters such as these. A candidate can never be seen as insulting or talking down to them. To engage in the former is to be elitist; to engage in the latter is to pander. Elitism and pandering are qualities that disqualify a candidate from representing the civil sphere. Those who fail to garner the electoral support of these mythic voters are constructed in a post-hoc manner as having not been sufficiently civil and thus of having deserved their fate. Their character, campaign, and stance on issues have been rejected by that idealized figure John Q. Public. Regardless of their earlier, prelection days of respect and glory, they are now pol-luted, having fallen on the wrong side of the civil, anticivil divide. Listen to New Mexico governor Bill Richardson's postprimary indictment of the Hillary Clinton campaign. This former Clinton supporter had switched sides to endorse Barack Obama during the heat of the primary campaign. He now opines that "what hurt them [the Clintons] was their sense of entitlement that the presidency was theirs and all the acolytes should fall in line." Because Hillary Clinton was rejected

by the voters, she must now be situated as outside the civil sphere or at least as peripheral to its cultural core. Richardson suggests the Clintons have lost because they deserved to. They were not democratic but arrogant, demanding subservience rather than facilitating autonomy. They put themselves above the voters, taking them for granted until it was too late. As we have seen in chapter 2, even when the putatively arrogant Hillary Clinton finally does energetically court Democratic voters late in her campaign, she is accused of pandering, of deceptively posing as a "working-class hero" rather than speaking truth to stereotype. She is also framed as being overly dependent on her husband, subordinating herself to his pettiness and temper and his insidious, if seemingly implicit, racial slurs against Obama.

Voters have the last word in the struggle for political power. On voting day, by pulling a magical lever whose working parts are, like those of the Wizard of Oz, hidden behind a screen, the secret votes of interested citizens are transformed into the publicly proclaimed general will. The beneficent force of civil solidarity reemerges to calm the passions and interests of divisive partisan struggle.<sup>10</sup> Until that ritual action allows purging catharsis, however, politics is about creating difference, not overcoming it.

#### Obama Moves to the Center

When they struggle for votes, candidates try to project themselves as worthy vessels of democratic myth. The problem is that political action must be practical and down to earth. Good politicians are strategic and tactical, their speech and action continuously changing. Yet, they must align their shifting behavior with the sacred side of the sharply dichotomous morality—the binary discourse—that defines American democratic life. That discourse is rock solid and relatively unchanging regardless of the vagaries of practical political life.

After winning enough delegates to secure the Democratic nomination, Obama pivots from left to center, announcing positions and policies that, for many of his liberal supporters, seem to undermine the authenticity of his heroic performance and the democratic character of his campaign. "I'm disgusted with him," a young environmentally conscious woman remarks to the *New York Times*. "This is the first time I've ever seen him lie to us," a 27 year old video engineer complains, confessing "It turns out he's another politician."<sup>11</sup> The longtime New York liberal Nat Hentoff publicly announces his feelings of betrayal in a florid and sentimental guest column for the conservative *Washington Times*:

I was among the millions of Americans to whom such faded words as "change" and "hope" in political campaigns began to brighten as Barack

Obama was energizing both new voters while tempering the hardened skepticism of those of us who had been gulled by glowing politicians who wound up like the enticing con man played by Robert Preston in the classic movie, "The Music Man." Now, more of Mr. Obama's followers are feeling newly gulled by him... Like millions of Americans, I, for a time, was buoyed—by the real-time prospect of our first black president and much more by the likelihood that Mr. Obama would pierce the dense hypocrisy and insatiable power-grabbing of current American politics. [But] Mr. Obama has decided he can come closer to securing the Oval Office by softening his starlight enough to change some of his principles... Instead of the ennobling clarion trombones of change we have been promised, this "adjusting" of one's principles has long been the common juggling of our common politicians... I remember the surge of hope for a national change as a child, during the Great Depression, when, while my mother would walk blocks to save a few cents on food, there came Franklin Delano Roosevelt! I haven't seen such a surge since Mr. Obama's first chorus, but I can no longer believe in this messenger of such tidings.<sup>12</sup>

The media seem to agree. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "the disillusionment has been palpable."<sup>13</sup> The *Washington Times* observes that Obama's "glaring flip-flops have led voters to question his sincerity and his competence."<sup>14</sup> The *New York Times* reports "what some view as a shameless play to a general election audience."<sup>15</sup> The left-wing blog *Daily Kos* announces that Obama's "veneer as a transformative politician has faded."<sup>16</sup>

#### Flexible Scripts, Fixed Binaries

These are dangerous accusations, challenging Obama's democratic standing as a hero in civil society. Yet, political actors, even those who would be heroes, have flexibility. It is not the broad, highly structured, and long-standing discourse of civil society that determines political performances but narrowly focused, relationally ad hoc scripts. Scripts mediate between deep cultural background and action in the here and now. In political campaigns, arguments over scripting are where the binaries are worked and played.<sup>17</sup>

A major scripting challenge emerges when Obama announces, during the postprimary weeks, that he will withdraw from the public financing system designed for presidential campaigns. The most significant effort at post-Water-gate civil repair, public financing represented a serious, if not terribly effective,

effort to neutralize the distorting effect of economic inequality on the struggle for democratic power. Not only had presidential candidate Obama always publicly embraced public financing, but as a state legislator in Illinois he had also proudly cosponsored similar reform. His Republican opponent in the presidential campaign was strongly associated with such public financing as well. The "McCain-Reingold" public financing bill was not warmly welcomed in conservative circles.

Obama had adumbrated his doubts about public financing from the time his online fundraising capacity became evident yet he had promised not to abandon it. He had seemed to draw a line in the sand, demarcating civil pure from civil impure with regard to campaign financing in an implacable way. It is no wonder that, when his new position becomes known, Obama's aides publicly acknowledge their concern that it "might tarnish" him.<sup>18</sup> In a seething report, the *Times* complains that Obama's shift will "likely transform the landscape of presidential elections, injecting hundreds of millions" of dollars of private money into what should be a public and civil electoral campaign. "The decision means that Mr. Obama will have to spend considerably more time raising money," the news story continues, "at the expense of spending time meeting with voters." In its lead editorial that same day, "Public Funding on the Ropes," the *Times* portrays Obama as going against the principles of civil society and as betraying "his evocative vows to depart from self-interested politics."<sup>19</sup> In a tart and bitter column, the paper's in-house conservative David Brooks begins, "God, Republicans are saps."<sup>20</sup> Here they had "thought they were campaigning against Mr. Rogers," when in fact they are up against "Fast Eddie Obama." Obama is not "a naive Stevenson type," Brooks warns his fellow Republicans, but a "hardball Chicago politician." Obama is a "hidden schizo," an "idealist in public but in private is... the promise-breaking, tough-minded Chicago pol who'd throw you under the truck for votes." By abandoning public financing, "Fast Eddie didn't just sell out the primary cause of his life," but he did it with style, "so risibly insincere" that "he makes Lee Atwater's ghost gape and applaud." It is shocking, Brooks declares, that "the media and activists won't care" about such "cut-throat political calculation."

Faced with these threats to his character as a civil hero, Obama works the binaries. He offers the counterintuitive claim that abandoning public financing actually brings him more closely into alignment with the positive side of democratic discourse. If he has abandoned his earlier promise, it has been to better defend civil society against the secretive and manipulative forces of his Republican opponents, who are "masters at gaming the system and will spend millions unearring" him whether he accepts public funds or not.<sup>21</sup> He has decided to maximize private gift giving, Obama explains, to better defend himself against such Republican attacks. Obama also points out that the Republican Party's war chest stands at \$50 million against the paltry \$10 million gathered by the Democratic

National Committee, highlighting the anomaly that public funding fails to regulate spending by political parties. Obama gestures, as well, to the ultraconservative nonparty groups—the so-called 527s—that are lining up to run anti-Obama TV ads on behalf of McCain. Their funding is not regulated either, Obama points out. Then, working the binaries even more audaciously, the Democrat insists that his unregulated, online fundraising actually represents “a new kind of politics.” Because it multiplies millions of relatively small donations, Obama claims, this new web-based approach is actually the most civil possible way for a candidate to raise money. It should not be classified with the polluted financing the public system was erected to thwart.

McCain tries to prevent the Obama hero from working the binaries in this way. The Republican leader scripts his opponent’s action in terms of antidemocratic discourse and accuses him of lying and manipulation. Obama has completely reversed himself and betrayed the American people. As evidence, McCain points to the *Times*’ concern that having unlimited access to campaign funding will allow Obama to buy television ads outside “the traditional battleground states.” A Republican strategist points out that the Obama campaign had just purchased a raft of television time for advertising in Georgia. “I think the last guy to buy Georgia was General Sherman,” the strategist sarcastically remarks, describing it as “a very aggressive election strategy.” William Tecumseh Sherman, the Union general who laid waste a wide swath through Georgia during the waning days of the Civil War, became a mythical representation of sectarian, anticivil aggression.

Another controversy erupts when Obama seems to endorse a much-anticipated Supreme Court ruling confirming that the Constitution gives private citizens the right to keep handguns in their homes. Once again, this move seems to challenge Obama’s scripted character as heroic civil protagonist. Is Obama’s reaction to the Court’s ruling courageous and responsible, or is it pandering to the gun lobby and socially conservative voters? In the guise of purely factual observation, *Times* reporter Michael Powell reminds readers that Obama “has executed several policy piroquettes in recent weeks, each time landing more toward the center.”<sup>22</sup> Powell describes Obama as stealthily Machiavellian, writing how “this most observant of politicians” has shown throughout his career “an appreciation for the virtues of political ambiguity.” Noting “Obama has taken calibrated positions” on a number of issues in recent weeks, Powell characterizes the Democrat’s response to the Supreme Court decision as “Delphic.” Far from dignifying Obama with this classical metaphor, Powell is suggesting he has been evasive. Though not directly deceitful, Obama’s response to criticism has been slippery—like those once issued from the oracle at Delphi, it can be proven neither right nor wrong.

The question really boils down to a philosophical dispute. It pits Immanuel Kant against William James and sits at the core of American political culture. Is

public action ethical only if it consistently follows a principled, categorical imperative of universal morality? Or can morality guide action in a more practical manner by taking account of the differentiating details of each situation? How does a practical politician follow principle in a down-and-dirty political fight? According to transcendental morality, Obama must be lying. According to the American philosophical tradition, he is simply being pragmatic. If action is deemed pragmatic, virtue can still be upheld.

To adjudicate this question, Michael Powell, the *Times* reporter, turns to an academic, the American historian Robert Dallek. Dallek assures readers that presidential candidates want to “be seen as pragmatic.” When politicians shift positions on an issue, this should not be taken as evidence that “they are utterly insincere.” When Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran for president, he “slipped and slid his way through the 1932 election,” so much so that Herbert Hoover, the incumbent president and Roosevelt’s opponent, “called him a ‘chameleon on plaid.’” Roosevelt went on to win this electoral fight and three more after that and today is regarded as a great man. According to pragmatism, politically motivated policy shifts can be signs of flexibility, not the abandonment of principle. They are evidence of intelligence, of rationality rather than dogmatism—not deceit and flip-flops.

PRAGMATIC SHIFTS	DECEITFUL FLIP-FLOPS
Flexible	Rigid
Reasonable	Ideological
Sincere	Calculated
Principled	Evasive

Obama expresses his reaction to the Court’s gun decision in an extraordinarily careful way. He suggests the Court has itself been pragmatic and that its protection of handguns “is not *absolute*.”<sup>23</sup> The ruling can be seen as supporting not violence but civility, for the Court has stipulated, Obama claims, that gun control remains “subject to *reasonable* regulations enacted by communities to keep their streets safe.” Obama reaches for the ideal that is most fundamental to the civil sphere, the belief that individual autonomy and communal obligations are intertwined in principle even if, in practical life, they often restlessly collide. He urges the citizen audience to get beyond the headlines to the small print of the Court’s decision. Because the Court does allow gun control laws under certain conditions, the decision “reinforces that if we act *responsibly*,” we can protect individuals’ rights and the community at the same time.<sup>24</sup> Cites and states can still make laws against “*unscrupulous* gun deals” and pass legislation to keep “*illegal* handguns off the streets.”

Against accusations that their candidate has deceitfully flip-flopped, Obama's aides work the binaries with a flourish. They supply extenuating context, reaching for a reality that they claim reveals Obama's larger truth. "Flippers are important," a staffer tells the *Times*' John Harwood, only "when they reinforce a larger narrative about a candidate's negative attributes."<sup>25</sup> In other words, changing one's position may or may not be seen as a polluted flip-flop. Because the expression of this changing of position is open and contingent, it can be aligned with either a dramatic or an antidemocratic position. By way of illustration, Harwood reports that "operatives in both parties" agree that former presidential candidate John Kerry's "apparent equivocation on the Iraq war damaged his 2004 campaign"—his shifting positions were seen not as reasoned and pragmatic but as evasive and weak. McCain staffers insist that Obama's reaction to the Supreme Court—which could be seen as nuanced and rational—must be framed in a similarly negative, Kerry-like way. They argue that the new scripting of his actions shows that Obama "is not a change agent but just a typical politician," one who is "stereotypically two faced." Harwood himself refuses to take sides. In the last lines of his political analysis, he implicitly acknowledges the flexible relation between action and frame and reminds his readers that, despite much ado about policy shifting, Republican and Democratic voters alike give both candidates high marks "for being honest and straightforward." As the third-party mediator who represents the civil sphere, Harwood stands back from the struggle for power. Candidates paint their opponents' scripts as dark and dangerous; Harwood assures the national audience that civil rules are still in place.

During this same early summer adjustment from left to center, Obama suggests that he will "refine" his Iraq policies after meeting with military commanders later in the summer.<sup>26</sup> From the days when Obama first emerged on the national scene in his run for the Senate, his character had been tied to an antiwar theme. He had affirmed this position when he began his struggle for presidential power, promising to pull out U.S. forces, and identifying the Republican president's Iraq invasion as a disastrous mistake. In Obama's long primary contest with his more hawkish opponent, Hillary Clinton, he had offered that some U.S. military "support personnel" might remain in Iraq for several years but insisted that they would engage only in defensive missions and that withdrawal would still take place.

That Obama might now be hedging his antiwar position further sets off a firestorm of charges, a flurry of anxious accusations of betrayal from the Left and gleeful exclamations of "I-told-you-sos" from the Right. On both sides, critics demand to know what is behind the Democratic candidate's decision to "refine." What has caused his new policy? To what new conditions, if any, can it be ascribed? One explanation is that the Bush administration's "surge" tactic has worked, that America is now winning the war, and that, to consolidate this change of fortune, a higher military profile must be maintained. The problem with this explanation is

that it would mean that Obama's earlier, more unequivocal anti-Iraq position had been either dogmatic or confused. McCain as warrior hero would be vindicated. Such a new configuration of meaning might undermine the coding and narrative of the Democratic side.

Once again, Obama works the binaries to avoid being polluted as flip-flopping, and the *New York Times* helps him in this task. Refusing to empirically acknowledge that the surge has actually worked, the paper limits itself to the minimalist observation that violence in Iraq has declined. This allows Obama space. By itself, declining violence is not enough. For the surge to have worked and John McCain to be vindicated, there would have to be political "reconciliation" as well. It is on the failure to ensure this other civil quality that Obama now rests his case. Though violence has declined, Iraq is still, he insists, not at all a democratic place after the surge, as the Republicans Bush and McCain both had promised it would be. Obama also argues that withdrawing U.S. troops would allow the vast sums currently spent on military operations in Iraq to be invested in tasks such as improving schools and expanding health care at home. Here he connects military withdrawal to civil repair and to his heroic fight against inequality on behalf of more inclusive solidarity.

Yet, even as Obama insists on the failure of the Bush-McCain plan and the continuity of his anti-Iraq War bona fides, he promises to "consult" with military commanders on what exactly the timing for withdrawal will be. If he cannot become a military hero himself, he can engage such heroes in democratic deliberation. At the same time, Obama offers only to consult, not bend to the commanders' will. He engages the military leaders, moreover, not only in order to be cooperative but also to be rational, to garner every piece of "information" possible about the real situation in Iraq. With these facts in hand, Obama pledges that on his first day in office he would give the Joint Chiefs a new military mission. He will order them to end the war but in a civil way—"responsibly, deliberately, but decisively." As Obama puts it later in the summer, he is rejecting the false choice between a rigid timetable for withdrawal that ignored changing conditions and "completely deterring" to the recommendations of the military.<sup>27</sup>

So Obama maintains that his policy on Iraq has not really changed after all. In the United States, heroes do not do flip-flops; they can, however, be pragmatic in the extreme.

### McCain Moves to the Center and Then to the Right

In the early days of the postprimary campaign, as Obama faces the danger of being interpreted as flip-flopping, his Republican opponent confronts an even graver

danger, that of not being able to do difference at all. On the domestic front, as compared with the foreign stage, John McCain has often had a relatively hard time. Having inscribed himself inside the myth of the warrior hero, it is difficult for him to connect with the hopes for emancipation of a civil kind.

Still, as McCain pursued his ambition to become president, he pushed hard to cut a figure on the domestic scene. In his 2000 primary campaign, McCain certainly put front and center his war hero image, newly burnished by *Faith of My Fathers*. At the same time, he defined his difference vis-à-vis the younger Bush in a domestic way, working the civil binaries and folding them into the narrative arc of an American prodigal son. Scripting himself as standing up against authority and dogma, the emerging McCain character denounced religious fundamentalism and its arbitrary intervention into the political scene. At one point, he publicly criticized Bob Jones University for its ban on interracial dating and its anti-Catholic policies; at another, he confronted the founder of the Moral Majority, minister Jerry Falwell himself. McCain denounced George Bush for pandering to the new religious Right on issues such as abortion and federal funding for religious schools. He unfavorably compared Bush's dependence on his father's legacy with his own fierce independence from his illustrious forebears, as witnessed by his decision to leave the military for politics and the East Coast establishment for the freewheeling Southwest. Unlike many big-time campaigners, McCain did not seem to script his performances either for citizen audiences or for the media. He answered reporters' questions directly, sitting side by side with them on the campaign bus, which quickly became labeled the "Straight-talk Express."

What emerged from McCain's 2000 staging was a collective representation of compelling authenticity embedded in a narrative of potentially significant civil power. The qualities that most distinguished McCain's character in this first phase of his struggle for presidential power were honesty, independence, and transparency. His humiliating loss to Bush and the religious Right seemed to make McCain only more determined to sculpt his own character inside the civil sphere. Certainly, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, McCain did everything he could to project his military image and to stress the imminent danger to American society from outside.<sup>28</sup> Yet, in the years of war following, he also vigorously challenged the abuses at Abu Ghraib, forcefully criticizing the torture of war prisoners as violating international law. McCain also helped sponsor domestically progressive efforts at civil repair: He wrote campaign financing reforms, sponsored immigration laws that laid out a path to citizenship, opposed congressional earmarks, supported cap-and-trade emission controls, and worked to expand health care to those without means.<sup>29</sup> McCain opened up a wide space between his character and the president's, to the point of fanning speculation during this post-2000 period that he

might actually switch political sides. In 2004, John Kerry openly solicited McCain as his vice-presidential running mate, though he did not succeed.

With the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004 and neoconservative hegemony in the Republican ranks apparently cemented in place, McCain began moving rightward. While he still pressed to outlaw torture in 2005, by the year following McCain was bowing deeply to the neoconservative side. He announced he would be willing to accept an invitation to Bob Jones University, renounced his earlier criticisms of religious fundamentalism, and sought minister Falwell's blessing, which he duly received. He criticized President Bush for not being tough enough in Iraq, withdrew his support for immigration reform, equivocated on torture, closed the distance between himself and the Republican president, and presented himself as a loyal party man. At the Republican convention, Rudolph Giuliani lauds McCain as "a proud foot soldier in the Reagan revolution," and the new John McCain easily gained his party's presidential nomination.<sup>30</sup> This time around, what distinguishes him from his Republican opponents has nothing to do with domestic issues and everything to do with his earlier martial exploits, and his militant calls for even more aggression to be shown in the nation's foreign policy today.<sup>31</sup>

### The Republican Stall

In the meantime, however, the pendulum of American politics is swinging leftward, and the neoconservative lock on the future became unhinged. McCain's sharp movement right, while clearly effective with bedrock conservative audiences, now poses a serious threat to the coding of the McCain character in the broader civil sphere. It muddies the waters of the general election campaign. McCain secures the majority of Republican convention delegates in early March 2008, long before Obama is able to do so in his party. Yet, after succeeding brilliantly in securing the party nomination, McCain's campaign for national office stalls. After tacking so publicly to the right, it is hard to change directions—to move back to his previous path of civil repair. With the danger of terrorism eroding and interest in Iraq fading, McCain cannot convince general campaign audiences of imminent danger outside the United States, but neither can he work the civil binaries in a sharply etched, powerfully delineating way.

With the Republican drive for power spinning its wheels, political partisans and observers rush to code the situation in a manner favorable to their own side. Democrats are quick to credit Obama for the McCain impasse. Not only has the Democrat been able to project his own positive and inspiring story, but he has also "proved defer and more fleet-footed at counterpunching" than either of

the party's two earlier candidates, refusing to be "cowed" into submission by the Republican side.<sup>32</sup> While Republican supporters are unlikely to credit Obama, neither are they inclined publicly to blame McCain. If McCain cannot do difference, this is because Obama has not been in office long enough to offer a real target. Also, it is difficult to make negatives stick to "a movement candidate." Another problem seems to be that, in working the boundaries in earlier elections, "conservatives have overstepped," and Republican candidates have "been sharply criticized for racially tinged remarks." McCain promises to be more civil and not to run a nasty, negative campaign. Presenting himself as "respectful" of his African American opponent, he feels compelled to distance himself from some intemperate, racially tinged political advertisements that have been created and financed in his name, as well as from some Republicans' openly racist remarks. Since Nixon, Republican candidates have couched anticivil accusations in racial terms. McCain makes public statements forbidding references to race in his effort to paint Obama in anticivil terms.

It speaks well of McCain the man that he refuses publicly to evoke primordial divisions, but it speaks badly of McCain the politician that he is not adroit enough to work the binaries in some other way. McCain's problems postnomination are the mirror image of his achievements in securing it. David Kirkpatrick, a *Times* reporter who often writes sympathetically of the conservative movement, surveys McCain's difficulties: While the Republican's "heroism as a prisoner of war in Vietnam has given Mr. McCain a special prestige," the reporter observes, "partisans on either side" find the Republican's recent political path "puzzling" and "even infuriating."<sup>33</sup> For his Democratic Senate colleagues, McCain is "a fickle gadfly who ultimately traded his independence to pander to the right." Undermining his earlier identification with civil repair, McCain now is constructed as neither trustworthy nor autonomous and as playing to party politics rather than principle. Yet, despite his movement to the right, McCain's fellow Republicans attribute to him equally anticivil qualities. Calling McCain "a serial turncoat," they accuse him of having a "truculent nature" and of being "aloof" and describe him as "aggressive, brusque, and abrasive." These constructions violate the demand that those who would be president cooperate with others in a civil way. A political scientist acknowledges that McCain has certainly demonstrated a talent for "political reinvention" but frames this ability pejoratively as "the art of political triangulation," recalling President Bill Clinton's decidedly slippery side. Even McCain's own pollster damns with faint praise. He testifies that his boss has been "very astute" in bucking both his own and the other political party, painting McCain as intelligent but calculating. So McCain can't be seen as pragmatic. His flip-flopping is understood to be driven by a desire for glory, for the nomination, not by altruistic concerns for justice. He has no principles to return to, no meaning there to be made.

Summing up McCain's difficulties vis-à-vis the civil sphere, the *Wall Street Journal* observes that "rarely has a party pick made so many enemies along the way."<sup>34</sup> Making enemies and defeating them are qualities that befit warrior heroes, and this is what McCain still seems to be in the postprimary season. "Chief among the strengths of the Republican nominee-in-waiting," the *Journal* writes in response to poll results later that spring, "is his experience with national-security issues, as a naval aviator and longtime senator."<sup>35</sup> The problem is that, in order to become heroes inside civil society, those who struggle for power must create a sense not only of external but also of internal crisis and offer a pathway to civil repair by thematizing change. Here, the *Journal* laments, McCain is failing indeed.

In an election in which most voters say they seek change, one in five says he [McCain] could deliver it. Likewise, the senator who first emerged nationally as George W. Bush's chief nemesis in the 2000 campaign now represents to many voters a continuation of the unpopular president's policies.

#### Maverick to the Rescue?

It was to find a way out of this impasse that McCain returned to the "maverick" metaphor that had identified him during his earlier, more independent, less rightward-tilting days. The metaphor had allowed McCain to connect his military narrative with an emerging identity inside the civil scene. The *Washington Post* first dubbed McCain a "maverick" in 1993. A few years later, when he published *Faith of My Fathers*, McCain carefully noted his pranks and troublemaking as a boy, as well as his rebellious impatience with military and political bureaucracies and traditions as a young man. This narrative arc could easily be extended to the qualities of independence and honesty that became attached to the McCain character before and after the 2000 presidential campaign.<sup>36</sup>

"Maverick" is a multivalent symbol, signifying cowboys and cattle rustlings, bad-boy pranks, and independence and integrity all at the same time. On the wide open range of the Old West, "maverick" first was descriptive, denoting unbranded cattle. Soon, however, the term became more metaphorical and connotative. It jumped species and, according to the *Cowboy Encyclopedia*, "took on the connotation of extreme individualism." In the late 1950s, this metaphorical meaning was featured in the popular television serial *Maverick*, starring James Garner as a poker-playing cowboy and gambler, a role that launched his career. Adorned in fancy black suits usually reserved for villains, Garner played maverick as a half-comic character, casually cheating his adversaries while being scrupulously honest



with friends, famously reluctant to fight but never losing once he started. Thirty years later, Tom Cruise inhabited this trickster character as Pete "Maverick" Mitchell, the naval fighter pilot hero of *Top Gun*, a film that entered American folk culture and crystallized the military and nationalist revival of the late Reagan years.

As McCain moved to the right, this metaphorical moniker of his civility withers. Declaring the obvious in 2007, *Time* magazine headlined "John McCain, Maverick No More."<sup>37</sup> The problem for this maverick-less McCain was that the pendulum of American politics had started swinging back from right to left. In 2006, Democrats had regained their majorities in the House and the Senate. Less than a year after *Time's* eulogy for Maverick, as McCain's postprimary campaign stalls, he is strongly advised to again brand himself as a maverick. Claiming that media coverage of the Republican campaign is "dead," the image-shaping conservative wizard and former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan blames the performative deficits of the candidate, not the press. "You know McCain's problems," she confides in her *Wall Street Journal* column, "He never seems to mean it. His stands seem like positions. He bebops from issue to issue and never seems fully engaged."<sup>38</sup> The only way "for him to become interesting again," Noonan concludes, is for McCain to "refind his inner rebel, the famous irreverent maverick." At a time when the incumbent president and his neoconservative positions are deeply unpopular, the extreme individualism of the maverick metaphor might allow McCain to work the binaries outside of narrow party lines and to finally emerge as a civil hero. Because McCain "is a maverick," the *Journal* had predicted hopefully that spring, he has "cross-over appeal to independents and some Democrats."<sup>39</sup> A leading congressional Democrat reluctantly agrees: "McCain has appeal beyond his party."<sup>40</sup>

However, as the months go on, the McCain character continues to struggle and disappoint. He is bound too closely to the Right to allow the maverick metaphor to fly: "McCain has argued that he is a different kind of Republican," the *Wall Street Journal* writes in early May but immediately seeks to reassure its readers that, while McCain "courted a maverick image of moderation, he has made clear that his policy agenda will contour to conservative thought"<sup>41</sup>.

On the stump, Senator McCain is laying out a string of conservative positions. He is proposing hundreds of billions of dollars in annual tax cuts, a deregulated health care system, and judicial nominees who will "strictly interpret the constitution," code for overturning *Roe v. Wade*... Next week, he addresses the National Rifle Association's annual meeting.<sup>42</sup>

"I'm a conservative Republican," Senator McCain says over and over again on the trail, belying his frequent image as a moderate or a maverick.<sup>43</sup>

If McCain is a maverick, then he cannot be a warrior hero, a foot soldier for Reagan, and the representative of neoconservative and loyal Republicans today. The metaphor that evokes "extreme individualism" does not compute. It cannot gather up the strands of his reality and excite the public's imagination about him in a new way. "Imagining how John McCain, the navy war hero, would play the role of commander in chief has been easy," the *Journal* observes, "but imagining how John McCain, the policy maverick, would lead as chief executive of the U.S. economy has been tougher."<sup>44</sup> If he is not a true-blue, neoconservative but actually a maverick, the conservative newspaper asks, what exactly would his position in civil society be? "Americans can visualize John McCain behind the desk in the Oval Office. The difficulty is where his policies are, and is he going to take the country where it wants to head?" Metaphors work if they crystallize new meanings, but a maverick "McCain presidency would be hard to categorize." Not only for conservatives but also for independents and liberals, McCain is a military hero and deferential to the Right. It is difficult to symbolically change such a character into a new thing.

As spring turns into summer, and the effort at positive image construction fails, the Republican campaign begins to go negative, shifting its metaphorical ambitions to the Democratic side. At the end of July, McCain and his staff launch against Obama a clever "celebrity" campaign. The *Times* headlines, "McCain Is Trying to Define Obama as Out of Touch."<sup>45</sup> Conservative strategists are relieved to see how immediately this metaphor sticks. McCain is finally able to work the binaries not by contrasting himself as domestically civil but by polluting the other side. In the battle over image, this marks a turning point. "After spending much of the summer searching for an effective line of attack," the *Times* explains, McCain "is beginning a newly aggressive campaign to define Mr. Obama." His campaign "will define Mr. Obama as arrogant, out of touch and unprepared for the presidency." Confronting this symbolic surge, Obama works the binaries. He dismisses the Republican campaign as "misleading," calls McCain "McNasty," and criticizes him as "cranky" and "negative." He falls back on the mythical assurance of the rational voter, assuring his supporters that voters "don't have much tolerance for Big Spin." Voters do tolerate the celebrity campaign, however, because they see it not as spin but as saying something real about the character who is leading the Democratic side.

Even so, by summer's end, as Barack Obama prepares for his spectacular performance in Mile High Stadium, it becomes clear that even the spectacularly polluting celebrity metaphor will not be able to stem the Democratic tide. In order to win the struggle for power, McCain will have to positively define himself as a civil hero. Conservative image guru Karl Rove warns that McCain "must achieve... a greater public awareness of the character that makes him worthy of the Oval

Office." Suggesting that "McCain's warrior ethic makes it difficult," Rove argues that "to win, McCain will have to show more." He will have "to persuade Americans he can tackle domestic challenges." While "voters trust him as commander in chief," they still have "doubts" about "whether he understands" them, "their concerns about their jobs, their family's health care, their children's education, the culture's coarseness, and their neighborhood's safety." To evince such understanding and insert himself into domestic life, McCain "must show the voters he remains a maverick who will, as president, work across party lines."<sup>46</sup> The day after Rove's statement, in a widely distributed television ad, McCain calls himself "the Original Maverick."<sup>47</sup> In case anybody misses the point, campaign spokesman Rick Gorke asserts, after McCain visits Nevada to woo its Republicans, "He's independent. He's a maverick. That has tremendous appeal."<sup>48</sup> It would, but McCain isn't. Two weeks later, during the Republican convention, the *Times*' headline says it all: "Party in Power, Running as If It Weren't."<sup>49</sup>

## CHAPTER SIX

### Walking the Boundaries



**I**N JOHN MCCAIN'S SECOND AND FINALLY SUCCESSFUL PURSUIT OF the Republican nomination, he cuts a dashing figure as a powerful military hero on the world stage even as he is deferential on the domestic stage to conservative authority and tradition. After securing the nomination, the Republican candidate needs dramatically to reverse course. For one thing, the nation's fear of terrorism has lessened. For another, regardless of the international context, those struggling for democratic power must become heroes on the domestic scene. So John McCain dresses himself back up in the garments of maverick. He finds that the clothing no longer fits. It is harder for him now to embody civil repair in a heroic way.

From this crisis of recognition follow the central turning points of the campaign. Because he is not in shape to become a liberating civic hero, McCain begins working the binaries in a less idealistic way, spinning his Democratic opponent as a celebrity. When this negative effort loses traction, he tries to pull a Republican civil hero out of his hat, tying his fading star to the tail of Palin's comet. When the Palin effect fizzles, McCain seizes upon the financial crisis, his final chance to become a maverick hero on the domestic scene.

Before examining these turning points in part III, I explore a strategy that seems to offer Republicans an alternative pathway to victory. Rather than working the binaries, McCain will walk the boundaries. If he has difficulty navigating ideals inside the civil sphere, perhaps he can focus on themes outside it, evoking noncivil ideals to make difference, to sacralize himself, and to label Obama in a negative way. The Republican candidate has long focused on the foreign policy environment of civil society, suggesting that Obama should not be elected because he cannot lead the

state's military struggle against dangerous anti-American forces outside. The civil sphere is bounded not only by the state, however. It is also surrounded by spheres that focus on religion, family, ethnicity, race, economics, and gender. McCain works to broaden his focus from the state to the other boundaries of the civil sphere. Walking these boundaries is a delicate task, but it must and will be tried.

### Noncivil Qualities

Democracy rests upon the viability of a distinctive and relatively autonomous social sphere, one defined not by money, power, religion, intelligence, ethnicity, or family but by liberty, equality, and justice of a broad and universal kind. Insofar as social solidarity is civil, political victory cannot be won by narrow appeals to family connection or ethnic loyalty, to racial preference, to the quality of religious faith or the superiority of ideological dogma, or to the superiority of a gender or sexual tie. Instead, those who struggle for democratic power must prove they possess capacities of a purely civil kind. To win control of the state, the collective political representation must symbolize hopes for broad solidarity and disinterested representation. To make this demonstration, candidates dive deeply into the discourse of civil society. Performing the binaries, they struggle to associate themselves with stirring and uplifting utopian hopes just as they make every effort, and with equal determination, to represent their opponents in terms of those dark and anticivil qualities that identify those from whom democracy must be saved.

The civil sphere is one social sphere among many. Inside it, the rules of democracy are intended to hold sway. Outside it, other conditions rule. In a pluralistic society, all sorts of nondemocratic values and institutions are deemed as important as civil ones and sometimes more. Parents love their children and often believe them to be virtuous no matter what crime they have committed against civil ideals. Believers fervently hew to the glory of their religion even as they acknowledge civil guarantees of religious freedom for all. Ethnic groups remain fiercely loyal to one another, giving preference and deference to their members above those of other groups. Those who struggle for power must be responsive to these non-civil discourses and institutions. They need to evince not just understanding but also sympathy and sometimes even identification with values and institutions that are more particularistic than those that sustain democracy but that provide the struggle for democratic power with energy and resources. Precisely because they strive to represent society collectively, they are compelled to address these other spheres as well. Even as they work the boundaries inside the civil sphere, they walk the boundaries that separate the civil sphere from—and intertwine it with—its external environments.

Candidates must become collective representations not only of civil ideals but also of family values, of ideals about sexuality and gender, religion, ethnicity and race, economy and class, and the military face of the nation-state. They must show themselves to be real men and real women; to be good fathers and mothers; to be people of faith, not atheists; to be good Christians, not Muslims or Jews; to be economically self-sufficient rather than impoverished, skilled businesspeople, not bankrupts; to be fighters for the working class, efficient executives, and good soldiers. During political campaigns, candidates kiss babies, throw out baseballs, go bowling, eat tacos, sport emblems, visit fraternal societies, milk cows, peer through microscopes, visit factories, shake hands with beauty contest winners, don yarmulkes, and admire country music.

Yet, even as they reach over civil boundaries, candidates must assure citizen audiences that they can reconcile such noncivil enthusiasms with the discourse of liberty and that, if they do win control of the state, they will mediate such loyalties in a manner that is disinterested, solidaristic, and democratic. Civil society does not elect people simply because they are good mothers or fathers, real men or women, faithful Christians, working-class heroes, loyal ethnics, efficient executives, or whiz-bang entrepreneurs. To gain democratic power, candidates must combine these sympathies with demonstrations of civil capacity. They must show that their sympathies actually make them more civil and allow them to become better collective representations of democracy itself.

Those who struggle for democratic power cultivate noncivil groups in an open way. Campaigns have outreach coordinators for every different sort of community—athletes, accountants, trial lawyers, Mexican and Japanese Americans, fishermen, farmers, the corporate world, and trade unions. They want these constituencies to see the candidate as favorable to their particular cause, as willing to help them out. Courting support from particular communities, campaigns aim to project the excitement and energy from their candidate to these groups and to channel the energy circulating inside them back again to the campaign. All the while, they must carefully maintain the separation between these communities' particular interests and values and their own, more expansive struggle for civil power. This double consciousness is what makes walking the boundaries perilous. In early August, the *Wall Street Journal* highlights this peril as it describes Obama's challenge as he walks the civil-religion boundary:

The Muslim-outreach coordinator to the presidential campaign of Barack Obama has resigned amid questions about his involvement in an Islamic investment fund and various Islamic groups. Chicago lawyer Mazen Asbahi, who was appointed volunteer national coordinator for Muslim American affairs by the Obama campaign on July 26, stepped