

Center for American Progress Action Fund



Memorandum to Interested Parties

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Subject: John McCain: A Third Term for the Bush Agenda

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As the general election begins, we expect a renewed focus on Sen. John McCain's policy platform. McCain is advocating a radically conservative agenda that is largely indistinguishable from the failed policies of President George W. Bush. We expect an intense debate over these ideas and the direction of our country. We provide the following information in the hope that it will be helpful to you in your upcoming public appearances, town hall meetings, and media interviews.

In recent conversations with journalists and commentators, we have been repeatedly confronted with the same myths about McCain. The misperception persists that he is a maverick that proposes moderate policies, no matter how conservative his actual agenda is. He has an opportunity to make deep inroads into key voter groups like independent voters, women, and working-class families. He is "a different kind of Republican."

The facts do not bear this out, however. The truth is that a McCain presidency is likely to be a third term for President Bush's policies. On the major issues of today, McCain has either been aligned closely with Bush or he has renounced his past positions and is now aligned closely with Bush. He claims to have differences with the president on certain key issues, but in fact the two men's current positions on these issues are very similar. American voters are beginning to see McCain's policies for what they are: 64 percent of voters say that McCain will continue Bush policies or adopt even more conservative policies.¹ Even the slogan "a different kind of Republican" is recycled from Bush.²

1. On the Big Issues, McCain Agrees with Bush

McCain professes to disagree with Bush on some issues, but not on the biggest issues. On the most important issues facing our country—the war in Iraq, the economy, and health care—McCain's policies are "virtually indistinguishable" from Bush's approach.³

The War in Iraq

Like Bush, McCain is committed to continuing an endless war in Iraq. While Bush says the war in Iraq could last 40 years, McCain has said that he is willing to stay for 100. When Bush was pumping false intelligence to the public before the war, McCain was a reliable echo. When Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz said we'd be greeted as liberators, McCain said the same. When Bush urged "stay the course" in Iraq, McCain followed. When Bush recommended a troop surge, McCain was the foremost supporter (see additional information on McCain's record supporting Bush's strategy in Iraq below).

McCain has said "no one has supported President Bush on Iraq more than I have." Exactly right. And he will pursue Bush's agenda of a long-term military presence in Iraq, regardless of the increasing regional threats and the escalating financial and human costs of this war. This is the wrong approach for our country.

The Economy

With gas prices near \$4 a gallon, McCain's answer to our energy problems is nearly \$4 billion a year in tax cuts for the five biggest American oil companies.⁴ More than half of his new tax cuts—\$170 billion a year—would go to corporations.

Like Bush, McCain has made massive tax cuts the centerpiece of his economic agenda.⁵ McCain once opposed the Bush tax cuts as unfair to the middle class and too expensive in a time of war. Now, however, he has taken the opposite extreme, embracing the permanent extension of Bush's tax cuts and proposing an additional \$300 billion a year in tax cuts. McCain's plan would essentially double the size of the Bush tax cuts, and the top 1 percent of taxpayers will get an even larger share of McCain's new tax cuts than they did of Bush's cuts. As progressives, we oppose this unwise and unfair tax policy.

McCain opposes helping communities purchase homes in foreclosure, a step that would protect neighboring properties from a sudden drop in value, eliminating home equity and possibly causing a vicious cycle of foreclosures.⁶ His foreclosure plan would reach only 200,000 to 400,000 borrowers by his campaign's own optimistic estimate, a number that is far smaller than what is needed and explicitly excludes victims of predatory lending.

Health Care

McCain is campaigning on a health care plan that envisions a radical transformation of our health care system.⁷ It envisions a system where most Americans shop for health insurance on their own in a highly deregulated market. It reforms the tax treatment of health insurance to promote individual insurance rather than job-based health benefits, and it makes it difficult for states to ensure minimal consumer protections on insurance plans. Tens of millions of Americans with preexisting conditions, such as cancer and diabetes, are likely to find coverage much more difficult to find and expensive to afford.

The McCain plan is also radical in another way: It envisions insurance plans that require greater deductibles and copayments that encourage patients to act more like “consumers.” In other words, it will make health care more expensive in the hopes that patients will use less of it. However, studies show that higher costs lead families to avoid necessary care as well as wasteful care. In particular, higher costs undermine effective preventive care and care for chronic diseases that can bring down overall health care costs.

The McCain plan closely resembles a deeply unpopular proposal Bush unveiled in his 2007 budget.⁸ Lawmakers were right to reject that plan, which failed to even earn a hearing on Capitol Hill.

Judges

McCain has pledged to appoint “clones of Alito and Roberts” to the Supreme Court.⁹ In his address on his judicial philosophy, he declared that “Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito meet [my] standards in every respect.”¹⁰

McCain has also promised to appoint “strict constructionists.”¹¹ He adds, “I happen to view life to begin at conception, and that is a moral belief I have. And, therefore, I think that *Roe v. Wade* was not only a bad decision but a flawed decision.”¹²

It is important to remember that his appointments would not be limited to the Supreme Court. He would make dozens of selections for lower courts as well. His appointments will have a decisive effect on the federal courts, and progressives should oppose their confirmation. .

2. McCain’s Claimed Differences from Bush Are Minor

In a speech earlier this week, McCain cited four other areas where he differed from Bush: the conduct of the war in Iraq, climate change and energy policy, government spending, and the treatment of the detainees.¹³ In each of these areas, however, McCain’s positions look much more like Bush than different from him.

War in Iraq

McCain claims to have been the administration’s “greatest critic” in the war’s first few years.¹⁴ In fact, McCain was one of the staunchest defenders of the administration’s war strategy. In March 2003—the month the invasion began—McCain said he had “no qualms about our strategic plans.”¹⁵ He believed that the Bush administration had “an appropriate strategy.”¹⁶ In 2004, he remained “confident we’re on the right course.”¹⁷ In 2005, he still believed that troop levels were adequate: “I think we have in numbers [sic] probably enough.”¹⁸

McCain repeatedly predicted the success of Bush’s approach. Like Cheney, Wolfowitz, and others, he predicted that “the Iraqi people will greet us as liberators.”¹⁹ In 2003, he said “I believe the war in Iraq can be concluded successfully in a relatively brief time.”²⁰ In a later appearance on “Meet the Press,” he said “I believe that this conflict is still going to be relatively

short.”²¹ In April 2003, he claimed that “the end is very much in sight,” and that all that stood in the way would be “a short period of chaos.”²²

McCain repeatedly defended Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. In 2004, he told Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes that he believed Rumsfeld had done a “fine job.”²³ In another interview, he said that he was “an admirer of Secretary Rumsfeld.”²⁴

Climate Change and Energy Policy

McCain is no longer a leader on climate change. Despite cosponsoring legislation to cap U.S. emissions of greenhouse gases, he is failing to push global warming at a crucial time. Historic legislation that closely resembles his bill is before the Senate this week, and McCain is withholding his support.²⁵ Bush also opposes this bill.

Like Bush, McCain also supports subsidies for oil companies. Last year, he opposed a measure to shift \$13 billion in tax breaks from oil companies to wind, solar, and other renewable energy sources.²⁶ However, he continues to support billions of dollars in subsidies for the nuclear industry.

Government Spending

McCain argues that he “opposed wasteful spending by both parties and the Bush Administration.”²⁷ However, McCain’s promises to cut spending are long on rhetoric and short on programs targeted to cuts—the same approach taken for years by George Bush.²⁸

McCain promises to immediately eliminate \$100 billion in “wasteful spending and earmarks.”²⁹ This figure relies on a Congressional Research Service report that uses a very broad definition of earmarks that includes foreign aid to countries like Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. The *Washington Post* called his \$100 billion claim “largely fantasy.” The Heritage Foundation estimated that, at most, it might be possible to eliminate \$9 billion in earmarks.³⁰ Other than a one-year budget freeze saving \$15 billion, McCain has not proposed any other budget savings. Instead, he has only promised to review lists of wasteful spending and to appoint a commission to draw up a new list.³¹

Under America’s first 42 presidents, the nation accumulated \$3.4 trillion in debt and President Clinton had our country on track to pay off the debt. Bush reversed course and is expected to expand the national debt to \$5.4 trillion before leaving office.³² McCain’s proposals to date would raise the debt to a whopping \$12.7 trillion by the end of his second term,³³ which would destroy the value of the dollar and worsen inflation. Progressives should lead the fight toward getting the nation’s books in order.

Treatment of the Detainees

After Attorney General Alberto Gonzales claimed that anti-torture laws and treaties did not apply at overseas prisons, McCain sponsored legislation to ban cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of detainees in military custody. However, the law includes a major loophole: a

provision authored by Lindsay Graham (R-SC) and supported by McCain that prevents courts from enforcing the law. Moreover, McCain sanctions the CIA use of waterboarding and other harsh interrogation methods.³⁴

This morning's *New York Times* revealed that McCain believes that President Bush's warrantless wiretapping program—which took place outside the laws passed by Congress—was nonetheless lawful.³⁵ According to the *Times*, McCain's support for wireless wiretapping contradicts earlier statements that presidents should obey wiretapping statutes.

Immigration

On immigration issues, McCain has broken with Bush—he is now more conservative. McCain once worked with Bush and Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-MA) to champion a comprehensive approach to immigration reform that combined border enforcement with an opportunity for undocumented immigrants to earn citizenship. Now, however, McCain says he “got the message.”³⁶ According to ABC News, “He hasn't exactly renounced the bill he championed in the spring, but he has fine-tuned his position and changed the emphasis to assure the skeptics and critics — and there are many — that dealing with the fate of those already in the country only occurs after the borders are secured.”³⁷

3. McCain Lacks the Special Appeal He Claims to Have with Key Groups

The conventional wisdom holds that in the current political environment, the “moderate” McCain has a unique opportunity to make gains among demographic groups that supported Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY), particularly women, Latinos, and the working class. Neither McCain's positions on issues important to these groups nor recent polling data support this idea.

Women

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, McCain's support among women is not strong. In fact, McCain today has less support from women than Bush did in 2004. While Bush won 48 percent of women in 2004, McCain gets support from only 44 percent.³⁸ McCain's weak support may be related to the fact that McCain is not a moderate on issues important to women.

McCain has opposed efforts to guarantee women equal pay. On April 23, McCain skipped a vote to invoke cloture on the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. The Associated Press reported that he opposed it “because it would lead to more lawsuits.”³⁹ Asked by a 14-year-old girl about his opposition to equal pay laws, McCain said, “I don't believe that this would do anything to help the rights of women, except maybe help trial lawyers and others in that profession.”⁴⁰

McCain has repeatedly opposed federal funding for abortion, even in cases of rape or incest.⁴¹ He joined just 20 other senators in opposing family-planning grants and only 18 others in prohibiting the use of Medicaid dollars for abortions in cases of rape and incest.⁴² In 2003, McCain voted for Senator Rick Santorum's bill to ban the so-called “partial-birth abortion” bill, even though the procedure would only be allowed when it is necessary to save a woman's life.⁴³

Working Class

Perhaps due to the failures of Bush's economic policies, McCain's support is lagging among working-class voters. Bush won 51 percent of working-class voters in 2004, but McCain has earned the support of only 45 percent of them.

McCain voted against raising the minimum wage at least seven times.⁴⁴ During the housing crisis, McCain rejected "activist approaches." He placed the blame on homeowners while supporting the bailout of Bear Stearns.⁴⁵

While working class families are struggling with stagnant wages, higher energy costs, and rising unemployment, McCain told the *Boston Globe* that "[t]he issue of economics is not something I've understood as well as I should."⁴⁶ McCain's tax plan offers little or nothing to middle-class families, while delivering the majority of its benefits to the top 1 percent of taxpayers.⁴⁷ One of his top economic advisors, Carly Fiorina, defended the outsourcing of American jobs before receiving a \$42 million severance package.⁴⁸ It is unclear how working class voters will relate to her circumstances.⁴⁹

Latinos

Hispanics' median family income declined by an average of 0.5 percent per year from 2000 to 2006, after rising in the 1990s.⁵⁰ Latinos also have been among those most affected by the economic downturn. The unemployment rate for Hispanics in the United States rose to 6.5 percent in the first quarter of 2008, well above the 4.7 percent rate for all non-Hispanics. The unemployment rate among Latino immigrants was 7.5 percent in the first quarter of this year. Of working-age Latinos, 52.5 percent are immigrants.⁵¹

The housing crisis is also falling particularly hard on Hispanic households. Many more Hispanics got high-cost mortgages than did whites. Nearly 46 percent of home-purchase loans made to Hispanics in 2006 were high-cost, as opposed to only 18 percent for whites.⁵² The crisis is expected to cost Hispanic homeowners between \$75 billion and \$129 billion.⁵³

College education is a particularly important issue for many Hispanic families. McCain has repeatedly voted against additional funding for Pell grants and other forms of student aid.⁵⁴

McCain's ties to Bush policies are likely to hurt him among Latinos. Some 41 percent of Latino registered voters say the policies of the Bush administration have been harmful to Hispanics, while just 16 percent say they have been helpful. McCain's performance among Latinos is 7 points behind that of Bush in 2004.⁵⁵ More Latinos give McCain an unfavorable rating than give him a favorable one (32 percent to 25 percent).⁵⁶

ENDNOTES

- ¹ CBS News, 6/4/08.
- ² Associated Press, 8/24/00; Bloomberg, 5/30/08.
- ³ Bloomberg, 2/26/08.
- ⁴ Center for American Progress Action Fund, 3/27/08.
- ⁵ For more information on McCain's tax agenda, see Robert Gordon and James Kvaal, "The Bush-McCain-Norquist Tax Agenda," 3/21/08, available at http://www.americanprogressaction.org/issues/2008/tax_agenda.html.
- ⁶ Center for American Progress Action Fund, 4/10/2008.
- ⁷ For more information on McCain's health care agenda, see Jeanne Lambrew, "Conservative Health Reform: Why It Could Deepen Our Health System Crisis," 3/14/08, available at http://www.americanprogressaction.org/issues/2008/conservative_critique.html.
- ⁸ Washington Post, 4/30/08; New York Times, 4/30/08; Wall Street Journal, 4/30/08
- ⁹ The Swamp Blog, 1/28/08
- ¹⁰ Speech by McCain, 5/6/08.
- ¹¹ NBC News, "Meet the Press,," 12/5/99.
- ¹² ABC News, "Good Morning America Times Square Town Hall Meeting,," 10/12/99.
- ¹³ Speech by McCain, 6/4/08..
- ¹⁴ ThinkProgress.org, 8/18/07.
- ¹⁵ Hartford Courant, 3/5/03.
- ¹⁶ NBC News, "Meet the Press," 3/30/03.
- ¹⁷ ABC News, "This Week," 3/07/
- ¹⁸ NBC News, "Meet the Press," 2/20/05.
- ¹⁹ NBC News, "The Today Show," 3/20/03.
- ²⁰ McCain Senate Press Release, 3/18/03.
- ²¹ NBC News, "Meet the Press," 3/30/03.
- ²² ABC News, "Good Morning America," 4/9/03.
- ²³ Fox News Channel, "Hannity & Colmes," 5/12/04.
- ²⁴ Fox News Channel, "The Big Story," 5/10/04.
- ²⁵ ABC News, 5/30/08; Washington Post, 5/29/08.
- ²⁶ Forbes, 12/13/07.
- ²⁷ Speech by McCain, 6/3/08.
- ²⁸ New Republic, 6/11/08.
- ²⁹ Washington Post, 5/23/08.
- ³⁰ Washington Post, 5/23/08.
- ³¹ American Prospect, 5/2/08.
- ³² Office of Management and Budget, 2/12/08
- ³³ Center for American Progress Action Fund, 5/08.
- ³⁴ New York Times, 2/13/08.
- ³⁵ New York Times, 6/6/08.
- ³⁶ ABC News, 12/26/07
- ³⁷ ABC News, 12/26/07
- ³⁸ Democracy Corps, June 6/08
- ³⁹ Associated Press, 4/24/08.
- ⁴⁰ Washington Post, 5/7/08
- ⁴¹ Associated Press, 5/6/08.
- ⁴² Washington Times, 2/18/08; the bill referred to is S 1956, Vote #231, 7/23/96.
- ⁴³ S. 3, Vote #402, 10/21/03.
- ⁴⁴ S.Amdt. 4272 to H.R. 3448, Vote #183, 7/06/96; S.Amdt. 44 to S. 256, Vote #26, 3/07/05; S.Amdt. 3079 to S.Amdt. 2951 to S.Con.Res. 101, Vote #76, 4/07/00; S.Amdt. 1383 to S. 1429, Vote #239, 7/30/99; S. 96, Vote #94, 4/28/99; S.Amdt. 3540 to S.Amdt. 3559 to S. 1301, Vote #278, 9/22/98; and HR 2, Vote #23, 1/24/07.
- ⁴⁵ Los Angeles Times, 3/26/08.
- ⁴⁶ Boston Globe, 12/18/07
- ⁴⁷ Center for American Progress, 3/21/08.
- ⁴⁸ Associated Press, 1/7/04.

⁴⁹ New York Times, 6/6/08

⁵⁰ Center for American Progress, 4/29/08

⁵¹ Pew, 6/4/08.

⁵² Center for American Progress, 4/29/08

⁵³ Center for American Progress, 1/30/08.

⁵⁴ HR 2660, Vote #331, 9/9/03; HR 1836, Vote #153, 5/22/01; HR 1836, Vote #155, 5/22/01;

HR 4577, Vote #156, 6/28/00; S 1134, Vote #29, 3/2/00; S 947, Vote #126, 6/25/97; HJR 1, Vote #78, 2/23/95; and SCR 13, Vote #220, 5/25/95.

⁵⁵ Democracy Corps, 6/08.

⁵⁶ Democracy Corps, 2/1/08.