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If McCain's A Moderate, I'm The Easter Bunny

Funny how the right-wing echo chamber is reverberating in the mainstream media. Consider an article in Saturday's *New York Times* about the fast-fading presidential hopes of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. According to the article, Bloomberg's chances are "diminished by the success of Senator John McCain, a moderate candidate..." and because "Mr. McCain's centrist views" appeal to the same people that Bloomberg had hoped to attract.

Moderate? Centrist? Is this the same John McCain whose voting record and views since his election to the Senate in 1986 have consistently been conservative, even reactionary?

During the past year, right-wing opinion-makers and politicians -- including Rush Limbaugh and other radio talk-show hosts, the Religious Right leaders like James Dobson, and the Romney and Huckabee campaigns -- kept repeating the mantra that McCain was a "liberal." In her *New York Times* column last week, Gail Collins, trying to figure out how these adults could be so worked up about McCain, concluded, correctly: "These people are nuts."

This seems like a reasonable description of Limbaugh, Dobson and their ilk. But how do we account for the reporters on Collins' own paper, plus the rest of the establishment press, who continue to define McCain as a moderate and a centrist, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary?

Indeed, McCain keeps insisting that he's a conservative, a "foot soldier in the Reagan Revolution," but the right-wing attack machine has so far prevailed in defining him otherwise. Exit polls showed that evangelical and conservative voters were more favorable to Romney and Huckabee. Now McCain, the likely GOP nominee, is trying to win them back. He's not worried that they'll vote next November for Obama or Clinton (as Ann Coulter has threatened to do as a protest against McCain), but that they'll stay home on Election Day.

Eventually, most of the right-wing fanatics will make peace with McCain, and may even contribute to the 527 political groups that, allegedly independent of McCain's official campaign, will embark on a mud-slinging campaign against Obama or Clinton like they Swift-Boated John Kerry in 2004.

But, as Ari Berman wrote in an article, "The Real McCain" in *The Nation* two years ago (December 15, 2005), "McCain has always been far more conservative than either his supporters or detractors acknowledge." On foreign and military policy, economic policy (like taxes, aid to the poor, and regulating business to protect consumers, workers and the environment), and issues like abortion and gay rights, McCain has consistently taken conservative positions. In recent years, he has co-sponsored a handful of bills with Democrats on immigration reform and campaign finance reform, that violated GOP orthodoxy, and cast an occasional vote (for example, initially opposing Bush's tax cuts for the rich, a position he has now reversed) that fueled the right-wing's over-reaction. But these votes are rare exceptions, hardly indications that McCain would govern from the center.

These rare votes, however, have considerable weight in the *National Journal's* ratings of senators on the conservative-liberal dimension. During his first decade in the Senate, McCain consistently scored in the 80s (100 being the most conservative). In the late 1990s, as he began thinking about running for president, he cast a few votes that broke ranks with the Republican party line and reduced his overall conservative ranking, but he still scored in the low- and mid-60s.

The nonprofit nonpartisan group Project Vote Smart compiles the ratings of various interest groups on its website, along with each congressman's key votes on each major issue. Consumer and environmental groups, civil liberties groups, labor unions, groups that advocate for women's rights, groups that voice the concerns of small family farmers, and groups that advocate for public schools, children, and the poor consistently give McCain low marks. Even the Disabled American Veterans gave McCain a bare-bones 20 percent rating in 2006, the most recent scorecard. In contrast, groups representing big business and social conservatives (such as the American Conservative Union) rank McCain among their loyal supporters.

These rankings and votes are public information and available on-line to even the laziest reporter, as are news clippings about McCain's membership in the Keating 5 scandal in the 1980s (senators caught in a web of corruption that involved lobbying federal bank regulators to lay off Charles Keating, a campaign contributor whose savings-and-loan company was under investigation).

But, with some exceptions, the mainstream media have given McCain a free pass, allowing his right-wing opponents to define him as a moderate, without scrutinizing his record. Perhaps because McCain is a somewhat avuncular, charming, grandfatherly guy with a sense of humor who occasionally shows up on "The Daily Show," he doesn't come off as an angry right-wing curmudgeon. Perhaps because he cosponsored a handful of bills with Democrats, and occasionally broke ranks with GOP litmus tests, reporters think he's a real maverick. Or maybe reporters' love affair with McCain stems from the fact that he battled and beat cancer, or that he was a prisoner of war during the Viet Nam war.

But reporters would have to be on a different planet to not recognize that McCain's views on health care reform, global warming, and war put him solidly in the conservative camp. Yes, there are some Republican senators who have even higher conservative scores, showing how far right the party has moved in the past decade. But to call McCain a "centrist" or a "moderate" is to remove any meaning from those terms. In terms of what McCain would be like as President, think William McKinley, Herbert Hoover, and George W. Bush. His agenda would please the Chamber of Commerce and the social conservatives.

Between now and November, McCain will try to reposition his image to attract the independent and moderate voters he'll need to win the White House. The media, however, have a responsibility to report objectively about McCain's views, the corporate interests he has served, and his voting record, rather than simply echoing the spin of his own campaign or of the ultra-right. In that context, McCain remains today, as he's been his entire political career, far outside the American mainstream.