

# **I'm Not Naïve Senator: You're Just Wrong**

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These are the words I kept waiting for Barack Obama to say while I listened to Friday night's debate. I lost track of how many times John McCain called Obama naïve, but it seemed like at least a dozen. You can be certain that some Frank Luntz type within the McCain campaign did focus groups and other tests and determined that voters could be persuaded that Obama is "naïve." The Republican logic behind this is understandable. After all, Obama is a skinny 47 year-old who looks younger than his years, has never served in the military and seems to believe that we should take an approach to foreign policy that is less militaristic and confrontational. In McCainland, this makes you naïve.

By not fighting this label, Obama seemed to almost concede the point. Nobody wants a naïve president; and Obama should have challenged this label-especially because it is wrong. Obama won the Democratic nomination largely because he was not afraid to challenge the Bush administration on foreign policy, but unfortunately, that Obama was sometimes hard to find on Friday night. For me, listening on the radio, the two most memorable sound bites from that debate were McCain calling Obama naïve and Obama saying "you're right, John."

It is certainly possible Obama used this phrase as often as he did because it is so unusual that McCain is right about anything, that Obama couldn't contain himself, but Obama can't run against McCain by saying he would be a third term of President Bush on one hand while on the other hand telling McCain he is right. Obama's best moments were when he pointed out just how wrong McCain was. A few more of those moments only would have helped Obama.

The approach McCain took during the debate suggests that his would be a presidency that, like the Bush administration, would be particularly dangerous because it would allow little room for reflection or thought, behaviors that are, apparently, viewed by McCain as naïve. For example, when discussing Iraq, McCain constantly described the surge as working but never addressed critically important questions such as to what end, whether the progress is sustainable after the US leaves or whether it is replicable elsewhere. Instead, we are told that US troops are brave, honorable and making great sacrifices and that General Petraeus is a great general, and therefore we should stay in Iraq. I am sure the first is true, and will give McCain the benefit of the doubt on the second, but to base a major policy decision on these criteria is to overlook a myriad other important and more relevant questions, which McCain seems to dismiss as naïve.

In some sense, of course, it is McCain whose world view is characterized by naivete. He still sees the world largely in black and white with no real ability or willingness to see shades of gray. In his world, the US is always right, never makes mistakes and always has the moral high ground. Perhaps the most striking example of this during the debate was that when asked what lessons he took from the Iraq war, McCain's response was bizarre and bordering on nonsensical "you cannot have a failed strategy that will then cause you to nearly lose a conflict."

Leaving aside the notion that it should not have taken the Iraq war to figure out this truism that is about as profound as saying "winning is better than losing," it is unbelievable that the Iraq experience has not taught John McCain that we should make sure we have structures in place to get proper intelligence, or that winning the peace is more difficult than destroying another country's third-rate military, or that many foreign countries do not greet Americans soldiers as liberators especially when they never leave, or that building democracy is difficult, or that in the post 9/11 world military might alone cannot guarantee our security, or that some wars are too costly in life and treasure. Instead, McCain learned simply that failed strategies are bad. McCain's unwillingness to confront the complexity of the situation, and his ability to ignore the bad news strikes me as dangerous and, yes, naïve.