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How Cindy McCain was outed for drug addiction

When an attempt to get tough with a whistleblower backfired in 1994, the McCain spin machine went into overdrive, and the candidate's wife confessed to problems the media was already poised to reveal.

By Amy Silverman

Oct. 18, 1999 | PHOENIX -- GOP presidential candidate [John McCain's](#) wife Cindy took to the airwaves last week, recounting for Jane Pauley (on "Dateline") and Diane Sawyer (on "Good Morning America") the tale of her onetime addiction to Percocet and Vicodin, and the fact that she stole the drugs from her own nonprofit medical relief organization.

It was a brave and obviously painful thing to do.

It was also vintage [McCain media manipulation](#).

I had deja vu watching Cindy McCain on television, perky in a purple suit with tinted pearls to match. It was so reminiscent of the summer day in 1994 when suddenly, years after she'd claimed to have kicked her habit, McCain decided to come clean to the world about her addiction to prescription painkillers.

I believe she wore red that day. She granted semi-exclusive interviews to one TV station and three daily newspaper reporters in Arizona, tearfully recalling her addiction, which came about after painful back and knee problems and was exacerbated by the stress of the Keating Five banking scandal that had ensnared her husband. To make matters worse, McCain admitted, she had stolen the drugs from the American Voluntary Medical Team, her own charity, and had been investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The local press cooed over her hard-luck story. One of the four journalists spoon-fed the story -- Doug McEachern, then a reporter for Tribune Newspapers, now a columnist with the Arizona Republic (and, it must be added, normally much more acerbic) -- wrote this rather typical lead:

"She was blonde and beautiful. A rich man's daughter who became a politically powerful man's wife. She had it all, including an insidious addiction to drugs that sapped the beauty from her life like a spider on a butterfly."

What McEachern and the others didn't know was that, far from being a simple, honest admission designed to clear her conscience and help other addicts, Cindy McCain's storytelling had been orchestrated by Jay Smith, then John McCain's Washington campaign media advisor. And it was intended to divert attention from a different story, a story that was getting quite

messy.

I know, because I had been working on that story for months at Phoenix New Times. I had finally tracked down the public records that confirmed Cindy McCain's addiction and much more, and the McCains knew I was about to get them. Cindy's tale was released on the day the records were made public.

But the story I was pursuing was not so much about Cindy McCain's unfortunate addiction. It was much more about her efforts to keep that story from coming to light, and the possible manipulation of the criminal justice system by her husband and his cohorts. The irony is that Cindy's secret would have stayed secret if John McCain's heavy-hitting lawyer, John Dowd (of D.C.'s Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld; his most recent claim to fame was serving as co-counsel for fellow partner Vernon Jordan during impeachment) hadn't heavy-handedly pulled out all the stops to protect the McCain family.

Dowd tried to get back at the man on Cindy McCain's staff, Tom Gosinski, who had blown the whistle on her drug pilfering to the DEA. But in the course of trying to get local law enforcement officials to investigate Gosinski -- Dowd and the McCains considered him an extortionist; others might call him a whistleblower -- Dowd set in motion a process that would eventually bring the whole sordid story to light. When that maneuver backfired, the McCain media machine went into overdrive to spin the story.

It's a story of unintended consequences. It's also a story of power politics and media manipulation that's very un-McCain-like -- if you believe his national media hagiography.

But both of Cindy McCain's staged, teary drug-addiction confessions have been [vintage](#) John McCain. His MO is this: Get the story out -- even if it's a negative story. Get it out first, with the spin you want, with the details you want and without the details you don't want.

McCain did it with the Keating Five, and with the story of the failure of his first marriage (Cindy is his second wife). So what you recall after the humble, honest interview, is not that McCain did favors for savings and loan failure Charlie Keating, or that he cheated on his wife, but instead what an upfront, righteous guy he is.

Candor is the McCain trademark, but what the journalists who slobber over the senator fail to realize is that the candor is premeditated and polished. John McCain shoots from the hip -- but only after carefully rehearsing the battle plan, to be sure he won't get shot himself.

This is the story of a time that strategy backfired, and yet the McCain machine still managed to contain the damage.

In the early 1990s, Tom Gosinski was the director of government and international affairs for the American Voluntary Medical Team, which did relief and medical volunteer work in third world countries.

Hired by Cindy McCain in 1991, Gosinski enjoyed his job, but he began to notice McCain's erratic behavior in the summer of 1992. In his journal, he wrote that he and others suspected

the boss was addicted to painkillers and might have been stealing them from the organization.

From Gosinski's journal, July 27, 1992:

I have always wondered why John McCain has done nothing to fix the problem. He must either not see that a problem exists or ... not choose to do anything about it. It would seem that it would be in everyone's best interest to come to terms with the situation. And do whatever is necessary to fix it. There is so much at risk: The welfare of the children; John's political career; the integrity of Hensley & Company [Cindy's parents' business]; the welfare of Jim and Smitty Hensley [Cindy's parents]; and the health and happiness of Cindy McCain.

The aforementioned matters are of great concern to those directly involved but my main concern is the ability of AVMT to survive a major shake-up. If the DEA were to ever conduct an audit of AVMT's inventory, I am afraid of what the results might be ... It is because of [Cindy McCain's] willingness to jeopardize the credibility of those who work for her that I truly worry.

During my short tenure at AVMT I have been surrounded by what on the surface appears to be the ultimate all-American family. In reality, I am working for a very sad, lonely woman whose marriage of convenience to a U.S. Senator has driven her to: distance herself from friends; cover feelings of despair with drugs; and replace lonely moments with self-indulgences.

In his journal-writing over the next few months, Gosinski would alternately complain about Cindy McCain and express concern for her well-being.

In January 1993, McCain fired Gosinski. She told him that AVMT was having financial problems and couldn't afford him.

Gosinski had already come to suspect that Cindy McCain had gotten volunteer doctors with AVMT to sign prescriptions for her, and had used employees' names to fill them. Worried his own name had been used (he would eventually learn that it had), Gosinski approached DEA agents in the spring of 1993 to report McCain's suspicious behavior. The DEA launched an investigation.

Almost a year later, with the statute of limitations about to run out, Gosinski hired a labor attorney and sued Cindy McCain for wrongful termination. He intended to claim that she fired him because she suspected he knew about her addiction, but the lawsuit never got that far. Instead, Gosinski's attorney wrote to the McCains, asking for a settlement of \$250,000.

Rumors about the untold details of the lawsuit hit the cocktail-party circuit that spring, but the story was locked up tight. As a federal criminal investigation, the DEA probe was completely secret; none of it was public record.

The entire story would likely have gone unreported if attorney John Dowd hadn't entered the picture. He wrote to Maricopa County attorney Richard Romley, a political ally of McCain, and asked him to investigate Gosinski for extortion.

"We believe that Mr. Gosinski is aware that in the past Cindy had an addiction to prescription painkillers ... Given Cindy's public position, exposure of this sensitive matter would harm her reputation, career, the operation of AVMT, and subject her to contempt and ridicule," Dowd wrote on April 28, 1994.

Thus began the inadvertent outing of Cindy McCain. Although the federal investigative materials were not public, the county investigative materials were. Romley launched an investigation, and one of the first things his people did, naturally, was ask the feds to turn over their investigative materials.

New Times finally got hold of the county investigative materials and we did our own story. So did the Arizona Republic, which was uncharacteristically aggressive, perhaps because the McCain machine had left the paper out of the loop on the story of Cindy's addiction.

Among the questions asked: Did Cindy McCain get preferential treatment by the feds? True, Cindy was a first-time offender, which partially explains the fact that she did no prison time; instead, she entered a diversion program. But at the time, defense lawyers told New Times that if Cindy McCain had been a poor minority and not married to a U.S. senator, she likely would have been locked up.

Did Gosinski intend to blackmail Cindy McCain? He told New Times he didn't. Other AVMT employees told county investigators that he did. But the time line makes extortion hard to believe, since Gosinski had already gone to the DEA before he brought his lawsuit against the McCains.

In any case, Tom Gosinski didn't out Cindy McCain. John Dowd did, and then Jay Smith was called in for the clean-up.

A few postscripts: Tom Gosinski left town shortly after Cindy McCain's story broke. By that time, his lawsuit had died, ignored. The county did not pursue the extortion investigation against him.

John Max Johnson, the doctor who had written the prescriptions for Cindy McCain, surrendered his medical license.

Cindy McCain still does relief work and raises the McCains' four children.

John McCain, of course, is running for president.

And only a handful of people remember the details of Cindy McCain's 1994 "outing" for drug addiction and drug pilfering, and the work of the McCain machine to protect her.

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About the writer

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