

Running From Reality

By [BOB HERBERT](#) – NY Times Op-Ed Columnist

Published: September 6, 2008

If there was one pre-eminent characteristic of the Republican convention this week, it was the quality of deception. Words completely lost their meaning. Reality was turned upside down.

From the faux populist gibberish mouthed by speaker after speaker, you would never have known that the Republicans have been in power over the past several years and used that titanic power to lead the country to its present sorry state.

In his acceptance speech on Thursday night, Senator John McCain did his best Sam Cooke imitation (“A Change is Gonna Come”) and vowed to put the country “back on the road to prosperity and peace.”

Mr. McCain spoke at the end of a day in which stock market indexes plunged. The next morning the Labor Department gave us the grim news that another 84,000 jobs had been lost in August, and that the official unemployment rate had climbed to 6.1 percent – the highest in five years.

If there were any good ideas at this convention of mostly rich and mostly right-wing delegates about how to haul the country out of this mess that the G.O.P. has gotten it into, they were kept well hidden. Perhaps they were tucked away behind the more prominently displayed creationism and “just-say-no to global warming” documents.

It stretches the mind almost to the breaking point to think of John McCain as an agent of substantive change. He once believed that Phil Gramm was the most qualified person in the United States to be president. And he now believes that Sarah Palin is the most qualified to be vice president.

That is not the fault of Mr. Gramm or Ms. Palin. But it sure tells us a lot about the judgment of John McCain.

Mr. McCain is a warrior, a former fighter pilot, and it’s no secret that Americans have long been thrilled by the romantic Top Gun narrative of fighter pilots, those specialists in the realm of the dangerous and the reckless. But we’ve also seen what dangerous and reckless behavior in the White House can do to a nation.

Sarah Palin may someday become president, and for all we know she may be a great one. But she was not chosen as Mr. McCain’s running mate after long and careful consideration and consultation. The best evidence is that she was a somewhat impulsive choice. Voters would be well advised to proceed with caution.

For most voters, the No. 1 issue in this campaign is the financial struggle facing working families that are trying to cope with job losses, declining wages, the high cost of health care, home foreclosures, bankruptcies and the like.

To a great extent these problems are the result of national policies, forged under Republican rule, that overwhelmingly favored the interests of the very wealthy over working people.

Senator McCain’s economic guru through all of this was Mr. Gramm, a former Republican senator from Texas and chairman of the banking committee. He was a demon for deregulation, and he and his wife, Wendy, who once led the presidential Task Force on Regulatory Relief in the Reagan administration, were among the big recipients of Enron’s largess.

Phil Gramm was one of the lead architects of the breathtakingly irresponsible policies (No more restraints! No more regulation!) that led to the sub-prime mortgage meltdown and the current credit disaster.

A corporate insider in the Bush-Cheney mold, Mr. Gramm was thought to be in line to serve as treasury secretary in a McCain administration until July when he put his foot very publicly in his mouth. To Senator McCain’s great embarrassment, Mr. Gramm dismissed the economic downturn as a “mental recession” and complained that the U.S. had become a “nation of whiners.”

That may have been a political no-no, but it was an accurate expression of the slavish devotion of the G.O.P. to the rich and powerful among us, and of the party’s contempt for the interests of working families and the poor. Senator McCain, it should be noted, fully shared Mr. Gramm’s anti-regulatory zeal.

This is an odd crowd, indeed, to be offering itself as a champion for working people.

Senator McCain has been a virtuoso at schmoozing and using the press, which he once jokingly referred to as his base. Much of the press has eagerly collaborated in the idea of him as an outsider, a maverick — in some sense an American everyman. But Mr. McCain, who has been in Washington for more than a quarter of a century, was always embedded with the forces on the side of the corporate aristocracy.

He didn't just stumble into the toxic relationships that got him into trouble with the Keating Five. And there was a reason for the closeness of his bond with Phil Gramm.

The populists' garb hangs awkwardly on the frame of John McCain. Everyman he ain't.