

# When "Tokyo Rose" Ran for President

## *What Was John McCain's True Wartime Record in Vietnam?*

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Although the memory has faded in recent years, during much of the second half of the twentieth century the name "Tokyo Rose" ranked very high in our popular consciousness, probably second only to "Benedict Arnold" as a byword for American treachery during wartime. The story of Iva Ikuko Toguri, the young Japanese-American woman who spent her wartime years broadcasting popular music laced with enemy propaganda to our suffering troops in the Pacific Theater was well known to everyone, and her trial for treason after the war, which stripped her of her citizenship and sentenced her to a long prison term, made the national headlines.

The actual historical facts seem to have been somewhat different than the popular myth. Instead of a single "Tokyo Rose" there were actually several such female broadcasters, with Ms. Toguri not even being the earliest, and their identities merged in the minds of the embattled American GIs. But she was the only one ever brought to trial and punished, although her own radio commentary turned out to have been almost totally innocuous. The plight of a young American-born woman alone on a family visit who became trapped behind enemy lines by the sudden outbreak of war was obviously a difficult one, and desperately taking a job as an English-language music announcer hardly fits the usual notion of treason. Indeed, after her release from federal prison, she avoided deportation and spent the rest of her life quietly running a grocery shop in Chicago. Postwar Japan soon became our closest ally in Asia and once wartime passions had sufficiently cooled she was eventually pardoned by President Gerald Ford and had her U.S. citizenship restored.

Despite these extremely mitigating circumstances in Ms. Toguri's particular case, we should not be too surprised at America's harsh treatment of the poor woman upon her return home from Japan. All normal countries ruthlessly punish treason and traitors, and these terms are often expansively defined in the aftermath of a bitter war. Perhaps in a topsy-turvy Monty Python world, wartime traitors would be given medals, feted at the White House, and become national heroes, but any real-life country that allowed such insanity would surely be set on the road to oblivion. If Tokyo Rose's wartime record had launched her on a successful American political career and nearly gave her the presidency, we would know for a fact that some cruel enemy had spiked our national water supply with LSD.

The political rise of Sen. John McCain leads me to suspect that in the 1970s some cruel enemy had spiked our national water supply with LSD.

My earliest recollections of John McCain are vague. I think he first came to my attention during the mid-1980s, perhaps after 1982 when he won an open Congressional seat in Arizona or more likely once he was elected in 1986 to the U.S. Senate seat of retiring conservative icon Barry Goldwater. All media accounts about him seemed strongly favorable, describing his steadfastness as a POW during more than five grim years of torture by his Vietnamese jailers, with the extent of his wartime physical suffering indicated by the famous photo showing him still on crutches as he was greeted by President Nixon many months after his return from enemy captivity. I never had the slightest doubts about this story or his war-hero status.

McCain's public image took a beating at the end of the 1980s when he became one of the senators caught up in the Keating Five financial scandal, but he managed to survive that controversy unlike most of the others. Soon thereafter he became prominent as a leading national advocate of campaign finance reform, a strong pro-immigrant voice, and also a champion of normalizing our relations with

Vietnam, positions that appealed to me as much as they did to the national media. By 2000 my opinion had become sufficiently favorable that I donated to his underdog challenge to Gov. George W. Bush in the Republican primaries of that year, and was thrilled when he did surprisingly well in some of the early contests and suddenly had a serious shot at the nomination. However, he then suffered an unexpected defeat in South Carolina, as the large block of local military voters swung decisively against him. According to widespread media reports, the main cause was an utterly scurrilous whispering campaign by Karl Rove and his henchmen, which even included appalling accusations that the great war-hero candidate had been a “traitor” in Vietnam. My only conclusion was that the filthy lies sometimes found in American politics were even worse than I’d ever imagined.

Although in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, I turned sharply against McCain due to his support for an extremely bellicose foreign policy, I never had any reason to question his background or his integrity, and my strong opposition to his 2008 presidential run was entirely on policy grounds: I feared his notoriously hot temper might easily get us into additional disastrous wars.

Everything suddenly changed in June 2008 when I read [a long article](#) by an unfamiliar writer on the leftist *Counterpunch* website. Shocking claims were made that McCain may never have been tortured and that he instead spent his wartime captivity collaborating with his captors and broadcasting Communist propaganda, a possibility that seemed almost incomprehensible to me given all the thousands of contrary articles that I had absorbed over the decades from the mainstream media. How could this one article on a small website be the truth about McCain’s war record and everything else be total falsehood? The evidence was hardly overwhelming, with the piece being thinly sourced and written in a meandering fashion by an obscure author, but the claims were so astonishing that I made some effort to investigate the matter, though without any real success.

However, those new doubts about McCain were still in my mind a few months later when I stumbled upon [Sidney Schanberg’s massively documented expose](#) about McCain’s role in the POW/MIA cover up, a vastly greater scandal. This time I was presented with a mountain of hard evidence gathered by one of America’s greatest wartime journalists, a Pulitzer Prize winning former top editor at *The New York Times*. In the years since then, other leading journalists have praised Schanberg’s remarkable research, now giving his conclusions the combined backing of four *New York Times* Pulitzer Prizes, while two former Republican Congressmen who had served on the Intelligence Committee have also strongly corroborated his account.

In 1993 the front page of the *New York Times* broke the story that [a Politburo transcript found in the Kremlin archives](#) fully confirmed the existence of the additional POWs, and when interviewed on the *PBS Newshour* former National Security Advisors Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski admitted that the document was very likely correct and that hundreds of America’s Vietnam POWs had indeed been left behind. In my opinion, the reality of Schanberg’s POW story is now about as solidly established as anything can be that has not yet received an official blessing from the American mainstream media. And the total dishonesty of that media regarding both the POW story and McCain’s leading role in the later cover up soon made me very suspicious of all those other claims regarding John McCain’s supposedly heroic war record. Our American Pravda is simply not to be trusted on any “touchy” topics.

I have no personal knowledge of the Vietnam War myself nor do I possess expertise in that area of history. But after encountering Schanberg’s expose in 2008, I soon got in touch with someone having exactly those strengths, a Vietnam veteran who later became a professor at one of our military service academies. At first, he was quite cagey regarding the questions I raised, but once he had read through Schanberg’s lengthy article, he felt he could respond more freely and he largely confirmed the claims, partly based on certain information he personally possessed. He said he found it astonishing that in these days of the Internet the POW scandal had not attracted vastly more attention, and couldn’t understand why the media was so uniformly unwilling to touch the topic.

He also had some very interesting things to say about John McCain's wartime record. According to him, it was hardly a secret in veterans' circles that McCain had spent much of the war producing Communist propaganda broadcasts since these had regularly been played in the prisoner camps as a means of breaking the spirits of those American POWs who resisted collaboration. Indeed, he and some of his friends had speculated about who currently possessed copies of McCain's damning audio and video tapes and wondered whether they might come out during the course of the presidential campaign. Over the years, other Vietnam veterans have publicly leveled similar charges, and Schanberg had speculated that McCain's leading role in the POW cover up might have been connected with the pressure he faced due to his notorious wartime broadcasts.

In late September 2008 another fascinating story appeared in my morning *New York Times*. An intrepid reporter decided to visit Vietnam and see what McCain's former jailers thought of the possibility that their onetime captive might soon reach the White House, that the man they had spent years brutally torturing could become the next president of the United States. To the journalist's apparent amazement, the former jailers seemed enthusiastic about the prospects of a McCain victory, saying that they hoped he would win since they had become such good friends during the war and had worked so closely together; if they lived in America, they would certainly all vote for him. When asked about McCain's claims of "cruel and sadistic" torture, the head of the guard unit dismissed those stories as being just the sort of total nonsense that politicians, whether in America or in Vietnam, must often spout in order to win popularity. A *BBC* correspondent reported the same statements.

Let us consider the implications of this story. Throughout his entire life John McCain has been notable for having a very violent temper and also for holding deep grudges. How plausible does it seem that the men who allegedly spent years torturing him would be so eager to see him reach a position of supreme world power?

But what about the famous photo, showing McCain still on crutches even months after his release from captivity? In early September 2008, someone discovered archival footage from a Swedish news crew which had filmed the return of the POWs, and uploaded it to YouTube. We see a healthy-looking John McCain walking off the plane from Vietnam, having a noticeable limp but certainly without any need of crutches. After returning home he had eventually entered Bethesda Naval Hospital for corrective surgery on some of his wartime injuries, and that recent American surgery was what explained his crutches in the photo with Nixon.

It is certainly acknowledged that considerable numbers of American POWs were indeed tortured in Vietnam, but it is far from clear that McCain was ever one of them. As the original *Counterpunch* article pointed out, throughout almost the entire war McCain was held at a special section for the best-behaving prisoners, which was where he allegedly produced his Communist propaganda broadcasts and perhaps became such good friends with his guards as they later claimed. Top-ranking former POWs held at the same prison, such as Colonels Ted Guy and Gordon "Swede" Larson, have gone on the record saying they are very skeptical regarding McCain's claims of torture.

I have taken the trouble to read through John McCain's earliest claims of his harsh imprisonment, a highly detailed 12,000 word first person account published under his name in *U.S. News & World Report* in May 1973, just a few weeks after his release from imprisonment. The editorial introduction notes the "almost total recall" seemingly demonstrated by the young pilot just out of captivity, and portions of the story strike me as doubtful, perhaps drawn from the long history of popular imprisonment fiction stretching back to Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo*. Would a young navy pilot so easily develop and remember a "tap code" to extensively communicate with others across thick prison walls? And McCain describes himself as having a "philosophical bent," spending his years of solitary confinement reviewing in his head all the many history books he had read, trying to make sense of human history, a degree of intellectualizing never apparent in his life either before or after.

One factual detail, routinely emphasized by his supporters, is his repeated claim that except for signing a single written statement very early in his captivity and also answering some questions by a visiting French newsman, he had staunchly refused any hint of collaboration with his captors, despite torture, solitary confinement, endless threats and beatings, and offers of rewards. Perhaps. But that original *Counterpunch* article provided the link to the purported text of one of McCain's pro-Hanoi propaganda broadcasts as summarized in a 1969 *UPI* wire service story, and I have confirmed its authenticity by locating the resulting article that ran in *Stars & Stripes* at the same time. So if crucial portions of McCain's account of his imprisonment are seemingly revealed to be self-serving fiction, how much of the rest can we believe? If his pro-Communist propaganda broadcasts were so notable that they even reached the news pages of one of America's leading military publications, it seems quite plausible that they were as numerous, substantial, and frequent as his critics allege

When I later discussed these troubling matters with an eminent political scientist who has something of a military background, he emphasized that McCain's history can only be understood in the context of his father, a top-ranking admiral who then served as commander of all American forces in the Pacific Theater, including our troops in Vietnam. Indeed, the alleged headline of the *UPI* wire story had been "PW [Prisoner of War] Songbird Is Pilot Son of Admiral," highlighting that connection. Obviously, for reasons both of family loyalty and personal standing it would have been imperative for John McCain's father and namesake to hush up the terrible scandal of having had his son serve as a leading collaborator and Communist propagandist during the war and his exalted rank gave him the power to do so. Furthermore, just a few years earlier the elder McCain had himself performed an extremely valuable service for America's political elites, organizing the official board of inquiry that whitewashed the potentially devastating "Liberty Incident," with its hundreds of dead and wounded American servicemen, so he certainly had some powerful political chits he could call in.

Placed in this context, John McCain's tales of torture make perfect sense. If he had indeed spent almost the entire war eagerly broadcasting Communist propaganda in exchange for favored treatment, there would have been stories about this circulating in private, and fears that these tales might eventually reach the newspaper headlines, perhaps backed by the hard evidence of audio and video tapes. An effective strategy for preempting this danger would be to concoct lurid tales of personal suffering and then promote them in the media, quickly establishing McCain as the highest profile victim of torture among America's returned POWs, an effort rendered credible by the fact that many American POWs had indeed suffered torture.

Once the public had fully accepted McCain as our foremost Vietnam war-hero and torture-victim, any later release of his propaganda tapes would be dismissed as merely proving that even the bravest of men had their breaking point. Given that McCain's father was one of America's highest-ranking military officers and both the Nixon Administration and the media had soon elevated McCain to a national symbol of American heroism, there would have been enormous pressure on the other returning POWs, many of them dazed and injured after long captivity, not to undercut such an important patriotic narrative. Similarly, when McCain ran for Congress and the Senate a decade or so later, stories of his torture became a central theme of his campaigns and once again constituted a powerful defense against any possible rumors of his alleged "disloyalty."

And so the legend grew over the decades until it completely swallowed the man, and he became America's greatest patriot and war hero, with almost no one even being aware of the Communist propaganda broadcasts that had motivated the story in the first place. I have sometimes noticed this same historical pattern in which fictional accounts originally invented to excuse or mitigate some enormous crime may eventually expand over time until they totally dominate the narrative while the original crime itself is nearly forgotten. The central theme of McCain's presidential campaign was his unmatched patriotism and when he went down to defeat at the hands of Barack Obama, the widespread verdict was that even the greatest of war-heroes may still lose an election.

I must reemphasize that I am not an expert on the Vietnam War and my cursory investigation is nothing like the sort of exhaustive research that would be necessary to establish a firm conclusion on this troubling case. I have merely tried to provide a plausible account of McCain's war record and highlight some of the important pieces of evidence that a more thorough researcher should consider. Unlike the documentation of the POW cover up accumulated by Schanberg and others, which I regard as overwhelmingly conclusive, I think the best that may be said about my reconstruction of McCain's wartime history is that it seems more likely correct than not. However, I should mention that when I discussed some of these items with Schanberg in 2010 and suggested that John McCain had been the Tokyo Rose of the Vietnam War, he considered it a very apt description.

John McCain is hardly the only prominent political figure whose problematic Vietnam War activities have at times come under harsh scrutiny but afterwards been airbrushed away and forgotten by our subservient corporate media. Just as McCain was widely regarded as the most prominent Republican war-hero of that conflict, his Democratic counterpart was probably Vietnam Medal of Honor winner Bob Kerrey, a former Nebraska governor and senator who had run for president in 1992 and then considered doing so again in the late 1990s.

His seemingly unblemished record of wartime heroism suddenly collapsed in 2001 with the publication of a devastating 8,000 word expose in *The New York Times Magazine* together with a *Sixty Minutes II* television segment. Detailed eyewitness testimony and documentary evidence persuasively established that Kerrey had ordered his men to massacre over a dozen innocent Vietnamese civilians—women, children, and infants—for being witnesses to his botched SEAL raid on a tiny Vietnamese hamlet, an action that somewhat recalled the infamous My Lai massacre of the previous year though certainly on a much smaller scale. Kerrey's initial response to these horrific accusations—that his memory of the incident was “foggy”—struck me as near-certain proof of his guilt, and others drew similar conclusions.

As a supposed war-hero and a moderate Democrat, Kerrey had always been very popular in political circles, but even the once friendly *New Republic* was shocked by the alacrity with which pundits and the media sought to absolve him of his apparent crimes. The revelations also seem to have had no impact on his tenure as president of the prestigious New School in New York, an academic institution with an impeccable liberal reputation, which he held for another decade before leaving to make an unsuccessful attempt to recapture his old Senate seat in Nebraska. Bob Dreyfuss, a principled left-liberal journalist, might still characterize him as a “mass murderer” in a 2012 blog post at *The Nation*, but for years almost no one in the mainstream media had ever alluded to the incident in any of the articles mentioning Kerrey's activities, just as the media has also totally ignored all of Schanberg's remarkable revelations. I suspect that Kerrey's war crimes have almost totally vanished from public consciousness.

We must always draw an important distinction between the actions of individual journalists and the behavior of the American media taken as a whole. I believe that the overwhelming majority of reporters and editors are honest and sincere, and although their coverage may sometimes be slanted or mistaken, they do seek to inform rather than to mislead. Consider how many of the explosive facts discussed above or in Schanberg's massive expose were drawn directly from the *New York Times* and other leading media outlets. But after those crucial stories run, the facts they have established often seem to vanish from subsequent coverage, causing them to be forgotten by most casual readers. Thus, the detailed account of Kerrey's apparent massacre of civilians received the greatest possible initial coverage—a huge cover story in *The New York Times Magazine* and a top-rated *CBS News* television segment—but within a year or so the history had seemingly been flushed down the memory hole by almost all political reporters. The facts are still available for interested readers to uncover, but they

must do the work themselves rather than simply relying on the summary narratives produced by mainstream publications.

The realization that many of our political leaders may be harboring such terrible personal secrets, secrets that our media outlets regularly conceal, raises an important policy implication independent of the particular secrets themselves. In recent years I have increasingly begun to suspect that some or even many of our national leaders may occasionally make their seemingly inexplicable policy decisions under the looming threat of personal blackmail, and that this may have also been true in the past.

Consider the intriguing case of J. Edgar Hoover, who spent nearly half a century running our domestic intelligence service, the FBI. Over those many decades he accumulated detailed files on vast numbers of prominent people and most historians agree that he regularly used such highly sensitive material to gain the upper hand in disputes with his nominal political masters and also to bend other public figures to his will. Meanwhile, he himself was hardly immune from similar pressures. These days it is widely believed that Hoover lived his long life as a deeply closeted homosexual and there are also serious claims that he had some hidden black ancestry, a possibility that seems quite plausible to me given his features. Such deep personal secrets may be connected with Hoover's long denials that organized crime actually existed in America and his great reluctance to allocate significant FBI resources to combat it.

Today when we consider the major countries of the world we see that in many cases the official leaders are also the leaders in actuality: Vladimir Putin calls the shots in Russia, Xi Jinping and his top Politburo colleagues do the same in China, and so forth. However, in America and in some other Western countries, this seems to be less and less the case, with top national figures merely being attractive front-men selected for their popular appeal and their political malleability, a development that may eventually have dire consequences for the nations they lead. As an extreme example, a drunken Boris Yeltsin freely allowed the looting of Russia's entire national wealth by the handful of oligarchs who pulled his strings, and the result was the total impoverishment of the Russian people and a demographic collapse almost unprecedented in modern peacetime history.

An obvious problem with installing puppet rulers is the risk that they will attempt to cut their strings, much like Putin soon outmaneuvered and exiled his oligarch patron Boris Berezovsky. One means of minimizing such risk is to select puppets who are so deeply compromised that they can never break free, knowing that the political self-destruct charges buried deep within their pasts could easily be triggered if they sought independence. I have sometimes joked with my friends that perhaps the best career move for an ambitious young politician would be to secretly commit some monstrous crime and then make sure that the hard evidence of his guilt ended up in the hands of certain powerful people, thereby assuring his rapid political rise.

Such notions may seem utterly absurd, but let us step back and consider recent American history. Just a few years ago an individual came very close to reaching the White House almost entirely on the strength of his war record, a war record that considerable evidence suggests was actually the sort that would normally get a military man hanged for treason at the close of hostilities. I have studied many historical eras and many countries and no parallel examples come to mind.

Perhaps the cause of this bizarre situation merely lies in the remarkable incompetence and cowardice of our major media organs, their herd mentality and their insouciant unwillingness to notice evidence that is staring them in the face. But we should also at least consider the possibility of a darker explanation. If Tokyo Rose had nearly been elected president in the 1980s, we would assume that the American political system had taken a very peculiar turn.