



## Dems to hammer McCain for '100 years'

By: [David Paul Kuhn](#)

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John McCain is scheduled to deliver a major foreign policy speech Wednesday in Los Angeles, one with a heavy Iraq focus, but chances are, Democrats won't be listening. They've already distilled his views into an easy-to-remember formulation: 100 years of war.

It is a reference to an offhand remark made by McCain in January about the possible duration of the U.S. presence in Iraq, a comment that Democrats now portray as the equivalent of the McCain Doctrine.

Though it's not exactly an accurate representation of McCain's views, Democratic strategists view the "100 years" remark as the linchpin of an effort to turn McCain's national security credentials against him by framing the Vietnam War hero as a warmonger who envisions an American presence in Iraq without end.

Both Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama began citing McCain's remark in Democratic debates not long after he made it, and their campaigns have stepped up the focus in recent weeks.

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On a recent conference call with reporters, Howard Wolfson, Clinton's bulldog operative, mentioned four times in two minutes that John McCain "wants to be in Iraq for 100 years."

"Instead of offering an exit strategy for Iraq, he's offering us a 100-year occupation," said Obama last week, in a speech marking the five-year anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

McCain never actually went so far as to call for a century-long occupation. Rather, in response to a New Hampshire town hall questioner who asked about President Bush's statement that U.S. troops could be in Iraq for 50 years, McCain interrupted and said, "Make it 100."

"We've been in South Korea ... we've been in Japan for 60 years," he continued. "We've been in South Korea for 50 years or so. That would be fine with me. As long as Americans are not being injured or harmed or wounded or killed, that's fine with me. I hope that would be fine with you, if we maintain a presence in a very volatile part of the world where Al Qaeda is training, recruiting and equipping and motivating people every single day."

McCain has found himself clarifying the remark ever since, from CNN's Larry King show to exchanges with reporters on his campaign bus. In subsequent interviews, McCain has taken to saying the U.S. presence could be 1,000 years — or even 1 million years — in an

attempt to make the case that the length of the presence is less important to Americans than the amount of casualties taken.

"The point he was making is really postwar. He's not even taken a position," said Mark Salter, McCain's top adviser. "He's trying to explain whether you could have a presence, a base, in Iraq after war, and the American people would accept it. His argument always was, 'If we are not taking casualties, well, they've accepted it in Japan, Korea and Germany.'"

While reporters may have let up on the issue, Democrats have not.

"This is the middle of an entrenched, ethnic, religious, guerrilla war. The idea to stick it out for 100 years before they settle it is crazy on the substance and insane on the tactics," said Jonathan Prince, a Democratic strategist who helped run John Edwards' presidential campaign.

Regardless of what McCain meant, Democrats view his remark as a rare opportunity to define him early enough in the campaign to make the charges stick.

"It's seldom you get such a clean shot. It's such a remarkably clean shot," said a senior Obama adviser, who asked that his name be withheld so that he could be candid. The "'100 years' comment is a frame," the adviser explained, to nail home the message that McCain is "more of the same."

"He's against public opinion on the war, and we're going to go make that clear," the adviser added.

Some Democrats see the "100 years" comment as this year's equivalent of 2004 Democratic presidential nominee John F. Kerry's infamous "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it" remark — a statement that Republicans used over and over again to underscore their contention that Kerry was a liberal "flip-flopper."

Kerry's chief strategist in 2004, Tad Devine, said there are "similarities" between the "100 years" remark and Kerry's \$87 billion comment.

"It's very easy to remember, No. 1. It's also underlines a very important attack point that his opponents want to make," Devine added. "And if McCain looks like he is backpedaling on anything and talking his way out of something, it totally undermines the centerpiece of his candidacy, that he is giving everybody a lot of straight talk."

Salter denies that McCain's comment is cut from the same mold as Kerry's. He argues that the almost unprecedented amount of access granted to reporters by McCain allows time to clarify and expound on statements.

"If the press is going to play referee on what is a bogus claim and what isn't, then this is one case," he said.

Salter added that the campaign plans to "show the public that there is a way out of there

without the worst consequences befalling us ... then you can re-earn their patience to do that.”

Democrats plan a constant drumbeat on the comment, hoping to brand McCain as a dangerous choice at an already unstable time in the world, with mild echoes of Lyndon Johnson's 1964 campaign against Barry Goldwater.

McCain's quip at a campaign stop last year, when he sang “bomb, bomb Iran” to the tune of the Beach Boys' “Barbara Ann” has only aided Democrats efforts to paint him as a warmonger. By highlighting McCain's general hawkishness and his “100 years” remark, Democrats hope to create an entirely new narrative about McCain for the general election.

“[The comment alone] doesn't yet do the job,” Prince said. “That is going to have to happen by redefining the image that John McCain has built up very well over decades: as a free-thinking, nonpartisan, independent, honest maverick.”

“But,” he added, “it's an opening.”