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A Candidate Who Embraces Opposites

By **MICHAEL COOPER**

At the [presidential debate](#) in Nashville last Tuesday, Senator [John McCain](#) made his case for fiscally conservative, smaller government, calling for an “across the board” spending freeze and denouncing what he described as Senator [Barack Obama](#)’s “government will do this and government will do that” approach to health care.

But Mr. McCain’s big proposal that night was to spend \$300 billion in taxpayer money to buy bad mortgages from banks and refinance them, a plan conservatives quickly condemned as an expensive effort to nationalize the mortgage industry.

The juxtaposition of a hands-off approach to governing with an embrace of intervention — albeit intervention at a moment of national crisis — was hardly unusual for Mr. McCain. Throughout his run for the presidency, he has often proposed policies that appear to be incompatible with one another, if not contradictory.

His foreign policy, for example, calls for ostracizing Russia for its undemocratic ways by expelling it from the [Group of Eight](#) industrialized powers, a hard-line position that he took long before Russia’s war with Georgia this summer. But Mr. McCain also calls for fostering closer ties with Russia to negotiate a new nuclear disarmament agreement.

Mr. McCain’s economic policy centers on extending President Bush’s deficit-swelling tax cuts and on cutting even more corporate taxes. But at the same time, Mr. McCain has vowed to balance the [federal budget](#) by the end of his term, a pledge he has reiterated even with the fiscal crisis threatening to throw the budget even deeper into the red.

His energy policy is built in part on curbing the use of fossil fuels to reduce [global warming](#), and he was an early Republican supporter of the cap-and-trade approach. But as gas prices shot up he made a series of proposals aimed at making gasoline cheaper and more available, from his call for a gas-tax holiday last summer to his new support for drilling for oil offshore (but still not in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge).

Supporters of Mr. McCain cite his varying positions as evidence of his call-it-like-you-see-it independence from dogma, and maintain that it shows the kind of pragmatism and flexibility that has allowed him to reach across the aisle in the Senate to forge compromises on thorny issues like campaign finance reform and [immigration](#).

But Mr. McCain’s detractors see his contradictory proposals as a cynical effort to be all things to all people, and as evidence that policy proposals often seem to take a back seat in his campaign to less tangible things

like biography and character.

"He has the same set of must-solve-problem approaches to policy and politics as newspaper editorial boards tend to — he kind of careens from crisis to crisis saying 'we've got to Do Something,' with a capital D and a capital S," said Matt Welch, the editor in chief of Reason magazine, who traced Mr. McCain's evolving ideology in his book "McCain: The Myth of a Maverick" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

In recent days Mr. McCain has sought to sow doubt about his Democratic rival by asking at rallies, "Who is the real Barack Obama?" But the same question could just as easily be asked of Mr. McCain. He has at times described himself as an heir to the hands-off conservatism made famous by the man whose Senate seat he now holds, Barry Goldwater. But these days he more often cites as his model Theodore Roosevelt, who took a far more expansive view of the role of government both at home and abroad.

In an interview over the summer, before the plunging markets led him to throw his support behind a major government intervention in the financial sector, Mr. McCain said he believed that "less governance is best governance." But he also spoke approvingly of Theodore Roosevelt's actions as a trust-buster. "So there certainly is a role for government, but I want to keep that role minimal," he said. "And I want to keep it in the areas where only governments can perform those functions."

On the economy, Mr. McCain often sounds like a supply-sider who favors tax cuts over all, but he still makes nods to the deficit hawks who want a balanced budget. On foreign policy he has surrounded himself with prominent neoconservative advisers, who have taken a hawkish view on foreign policy in the past as an instrument to promote ideology. But he also listens to the so-called realists, who favor a more pragmatic approach and more diplomacy. He has described himself as a "realistic idealist."

Aides to Mr. McCain have long described his approach to governing as being driven by a combination of broad principles and pragmatism, and a willingness to try to get things done even if it meant compromising in some areas. They point to his willingness to accept some provisions he disagreed with when he tried, in vain, to get a comprehensive immigration bill passed last year. Or his work with the Gang of 14 in the Senate, which cleared the way for the confirmation of several conservative jurists, but angered conservatives by avoiding a Republican-led effort to ban filibusters against judicial nominees. And they have tried to make a virtue of his unpredictability, branding him as a "maverick."

Mr. McCain says he bases his positions on the merits, not on his party's stands.

"You know, I've been called a maverick, someone who marches to the beat of his own drum," Mr. McCain said in his speech accepting the Republican nomination in St. Paul, echoing remarks he has made often on the trail. "Sometimes it's meant as a compliment and sometimes it's not. What it really means is I understand who I work for. I don't work for a party. I don't work for a special interest. I work for you."

But critics see him as rudderless, and note that he went from being something of a thorn in President Bush's side during his first term to a supporter in his second.

Robert Gordon, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a Democratic-leaning policy group, traced some of Mr. McCain's contradictory proposals in an article in The New Republic last summer that

was titled "McContradiction." Mr. Gordon noted that Mr. McCain had gone from being one of the few Republicans who opposed the Bush tax cuts to a fervent supporter of making the cuts permanent, and from being an outspoken critic of government subsidies to corporations to a supporter of what are essentially subsidies for coal and nuclear power. "A world-view, consistency from year to year, or even day to day, is beside the point," Mr. Gordon said.

Keith T. Poole, a professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego who studies the ideological voting patterns of members of Congress, said Mr. McCain had the most unpredictable voting record of any current member of the Senate. "Since the end of the Second World War, only William Proxmire of Wisconsin has been more variable," he said, noting that since Mr. McCain entered the Senate as a middle-of-the-road Republican two decades ago, his votes have oscillated between conservative and liberal.

Dr. Poole said that Mr. McCain's ideological flexibility might make it easier for him to reach the kinds of compromises needed to get bills passed in the Senate, but that it made it difficult to predict what kind of president he would be.

"McCain is, in terms of ideology, somewhat hard to pigeonhole," he said.

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