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## **Woodstock May Have Saved Sen. McCain's Life** **by Sheldon Richman**

John McCain scored a standing ovation at the last Republican presidential debate when he attacked Sen. Hillary Clinton for proposing — unsuccessfully — to spend a million taxpayer dollars on a museum commemorating the 1969 Woodstock festival, saying,

“Now, my friends, I wasn’t there. I’m sure it was a cultural and pharmaceutical event. I was tied up at the time. But the fact is, my friends, no one can be president of the United States that supports projects such as these.”

It would be easy to criticize McCain for politically exploiting his five-and-half years of suffering as a captive of the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam war. But there’s a more important point to be made.

Had McCain simply attacked Clinton’s attempt at pork-barrel spending — the museum is set to open next year in Bethel, New York — that would have been fine (although McCain, too, has some pork-barreling on his record). Taxpayers shouldn’t be forced to support any kind of museum.

But McCain had much more on his mind than presidential ambition and protection of the taxpayers. He was making a point about war and dissent. And here’s where he gets it very wrong.

McCain says he was unable to make Woodstock because he was “tied up.” How so? Was he kidnapped while sleeping in his own bed and carried off to the Hanoi Hilton? No, he was a naval pilot flying an A-4 Skyhawk near Hanoi. The A-4 is an attack aircraft. Wikipedia says it was “the Navy’s primary light bomber over ... North Vietnam during the early years of the Vietnam War.” It was used to drop some of the first and last bombs on that country during the long war, which is estimated to have killed two million Vietnamese. On October 26, 1967, anti-aircraft fire brought down McCain’s plane. He was beaten by a mob, then taken as a POW and tortured and permanently disabled during his long captivity.

While McCain undoubtedly suffered beyond imagination, the full context of his situation needs to be maintained. In the eyes of the North Vietnamese — and by any objective standard —

McCain was the aggressor. He was dropping bombs on their country — about 8,000 miles from his home.

He and his defenders would respond that he was serving his country and protecting Americans' freedom. He wasn't. North Vietnam never attacked the American people. The public was told it had attacked an American warship in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, but the U.S. government knew that was not true. And in any case, U.S. naval forces were gathering intelligence in behalf of the South Vietnamese government, with whom the North Vietnamese were at war. The U.S. navy was hardly minding its own business.

McCain, then, was not protecting the American people. In fact, he was interfering in a civil war, and was protecting a repressive, corrupt South Vietnamese government and an American president (Johnson) who knew that Americans and Vietnamese were dying in a futile U.S. intervention.

McCain's self-righteous excuse for missing Woodstock is tissue-thin.

What about the folks who were able to attend Woodstock? (Lots of Republican war hawks, such as President Bush and Vice President Cheney, were available, but apparently did not attend.) It's safe to say that everybody at Woodstock was against the war in Vietnam and the draft that was sending young guys over to kill and risk being killed. If that crowd had had its way, the war wouldn't have been fought. The people attending cheered to songs such as this one by Country Joe and the Fish:

Well, come on mothers throughout the land,  
Pack your boys off to Vietnam.  
Come on fathers, don't hesitate,  
Send 'em off before it's too late.  
Be the first one on your block  
To have your boy come home in a box.

Thus, if the Woodstock war position had prevailed, McCain wouldn't have been dropping bombs on Hanoi and wouldn't have been shot down, imprisoned, and tortured. Moreover, as one blogger speculates, had it not been for the anti-war movement, McCain might have been executed rather than eventually released by the North Vietnamese.

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