McCain goes over to the dark side

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"THIS IS NOT Luke Skywalker here," said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), discussing his friend and Senate colleague John McCain's second run for the presidency. "This is a totally different campaign."

Graham was looking for a way to reassure his fellow conservatives that they no longer had anything to fear from McCain. His choice of metaphor is one of those windows into the fundamental cultural gap that separates hard-core conservatives from the rest of humanity. To most people, who think of Luke Skywalker as a hero battling an evil and immensely powerful empire, Graham's implication would be seen as an unmitigated insult. In the world of the GOP elite, though, it's a form of praise: No, no, don't worry, McCain's with the empire now.

Seven years ago, of course, McCain was likening himself in public to Luke Skywalker, waving light sabers on stage at rallies and comparing his party's establishment to the Death Star. He would say such things as, "My party has become captive to special interests." He would cite a bumper sticker that read "The Christian Right Is Neither."

And now? Well, let's just say that if John McCain circa 2007 was campaigning against John McCain circa 2000, he would call him a communist. The old McCain called President Bush's tax cuts fiscally and socially irresponsible, a giveaway to the rich in a time of rising inequality. The new McCain was recently interviewed by National Review's Ramesh Ponnuru and asked if there were any circumstances, including the guarantee of spending cuts, under which he'd consider repealing the tax cuts he denounced and voted against. He replied: "No. None. None."

We all know that? In fact, economists know that this is not true. Conservative economists know this isn't true. Even conservative economists who work in the Bush administration have admitted this isn't true. As former Bush economist Alan Viard, now interviewed by National Review's Ramesh Ponnuru and asked if there were any circumstances, including the guarantee of spending cuts, under which he'd consider repealing the tax cuts he denounced and voted against. He replied: "No. None. None. Tax cuts, starting with Kennedy, as we all know, increase revenues."

How does McCain explain his conversion to voodoo economics? He doesn't. He says things like: "I haven't changed. My record is the same on all issues, which is that of a conservative Republican." Which is funny, because a few years ago one of his close advisors — someone who is now furiously insisting that McCain has always been a staunch conservative — told me, "Ideologically, we all changed."

Now watch him madly pander. In the same interview, Ponnuru asked McCain about cloning:

"Ponnuru: Would you be willing to ban it?
"Ponnuru: So you’d support something like the Brownback bill?

"Sen. McCain: Yes. I think I’m a cosponsor."

At this point in the interview, his advisor interjected to say, "I'll double-check that." It turned out McCain was not a cosponsor. His casual language about a matter of the deepest philosophical weight — Ban it? Sure! — suggests he knows little about the bill except that supporting it would help him win the nomination.

What makes McCain's conversion all the more tragic is that it's plainly not working. He has spent the last three years plotting to make himself the candidate of the GOP establishment that he once attacked. But, as the Wall Street Journal reported, "2008 is shaping up as the worst presidential year in three decades to be the candidate of the Republican establishment."

His career since then has indeed resembled a certain famous Jedi. He began as a crusader for justice. Soon he realized that he needed to acquire more power in order to accomplish his noble goals. But over time, his pursuit of power became the goal itself, and by the end he lost his capacity to differentiate between right and wrong.

This is not Luke Skywalker here. This is Luke Skywalker's father. But at least Darth Vader attained his position before the Death Star exploded.