## The nearly man

US senator John McCain is a vocal critic of Guantánamo Bay, thinks George Bush was wrong on Kyoto and was even asked by John Kerry to be his Democratic running mate. So why do so many people think he will be the next Republican president? He talks to Julian Borger past decade. Under Bill Clinton, Democrats

am like a government in exile, emitting a constant stream of alternative policy pronouncements and a whiff of indignant disbelief that the mán at the centre of it all is not wielding power. Senator McCain, a Vietnam war hero, remains far more popular across the country than George Bush, the man who beat him to the 2000 Republican nomination with the help of a well-financed campaign in South Carolina that is still a byword for dirty tricks.

McCain insists he has not made up his mind

whether to run in 2008, when he will be 72, but he talks like a man who intends to. Most polls, for what they are worth this far in advance, show him beating Hillary Clinton, John Kerry or any other potential Democratic challenger with ease. So the man who is in London today to give the Alistair Cooke memorial lecture represents both the administration that might have been, and one that may vet come to pass, become an earnest advocate of action against

global warming, and believes walking out of the Kyoto accord was a significant blunder.

As a route to repairing transatlantic relations, McCain says: "I think we should work more closely with all European countries under the leadership of Prime Minister Blair on the issue of climate change. If I were directing the policy, I would say we would offer to enter a revised Kyoto agreement as long as India and China were included." One of America's major gripes about the original Kyoto accord was that it exempted developing countries from curbing their greenhouse gas emissions. McCain has sympathy for this position, but does not believe that it justified the Bush administra-tion's decision in 2001 to abandon talks altogether and allow the issue to drift. "I think that in return for the United States' member ship, a country that emits 25% of greenhouse gases, [the Europeans] would be willing to

Ultimately, however, McCain believes the future of the transatlantic alliance will be decided in Iraq, a war he supported. He admits that the failure to find weapons of mass destruction has severely weakened traditional alliances and strained public trust in government, in the US as well as Britain.

"I think if we can show success and bring about a flawed but functioning democracy, and that spreads throughout the region, then, WMD or no WMD, our involvement would have been worth it," he says. "If, however, we fail, and Iraq falls prey to factionalism or radical Islamic extremism, then I think the critics are fully justified in their condemnation of

The only way to avoid that "catastrophic"

shin McCain's Senate offices failure, the Arizona senator has long argued, is to commit more troops. "It's one of the major mistakes that have been made that has caused us to experience some of the difficulties we've experienced. The assessment of any objective observer of the situation on the ground, particularly after our initial successes, is that we didn't have enough troops to control the country. Every indication is that we didn't have enough troops to stabilise the country. I might add, I heard that more than two years ago from a British colonel in Basra."

McCain, who was a prisoner of war in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" for more than five years of the Vietnam war, has also been highly critical of the treatment of detainees at Guancritical of the treatment of detainees account triamo Bay, calling for them to be tried or released, and pointing out that "even Adolf" Eichmann got a trial". As well as chiding the administration on its conduct of the war and on its detainee policy, McCain has been a constant thorn in its side over campaign finance reform. leading the charge to try to drain some of the corporate money from the political swamp.

a 66 % popularity rating among liberals, higher than Howard Dean, the former presidential candidate and current chairman of the Democratic National Committee. His crossover power is such that John Kerry, a friend and fellow veteran, even asked him to be his running mate against President Bush and Dick Cheney, McCain turned down the offer, which he sees as a case of mistaken identity

"I think of myself as a strong conservative," McCain says slowly and with some emphasis, in response to the suggestion he could be

## 'If Iraq falls prey to factionalism or extremism, the critics will be fully justified in their condemnation'

described as "middle of the road". He is every inch a war veteran, who believes in the exercise of American military might in support of the country's values. He was calling for Saddam Hussein to be toppled long before Bush started thinking about it. He is also a fiscal conservative, sceptical of government social spending, and most importantly in America's ceaseless cultural war, he is anti-abortion.

Some have argued that America's liberals have allowed McCain's plain-spoken, maver-ick style to blind them to his thoroughly conservative credentials. But his cross-party appeal may say more about how far the American political landscape has shifted over the

became converts to fiscal discipline at home and humanitarian intervention abroad. Since losing twice to Bush, and having been almost driven out of the broad Christian heartland the Democratic party is even re-evaluating it hitherto uncompromising stand on a woman' right to abortion. (Its leader in the Senate Harry Reid, is "pro-life".) In the current climate McCain is able to appear moderate merely be cause he has not made the crusade agains abortion the central organising principle of h e, and because of his readiness occasional

to break party ranks.

The senator himself, however, explains hi bipartisan support as being more a question c style than substance. "My approval ratings ma have something to do with the desire of majority of Americans for less divisiveness. I don't believe in personal attacks or disrespec

to people who hold opposing views."

Certainly the senator knows somethin about personal attacks. In the 2000 Republican primary elections, his low-budget "Straight". that the grizzled war veteran could wrest the nomination from the party's callow dauphin. But the next stop on the primary trail was South Carolina, the conservative heartland where the Bush campaign and its supporte

Pat Robertson, America's pre-emine television evangelist, swung his Christian broa casting network against McCain, as did tl National Rifle Association and the Nation Right to Life Committee. They were nervo about McCain's commitment to campaig finance reform, which threatened to cut, or least weaken, the link between their financi clout and their political influence. "In Sou Carolina, estimates are that in three wee, something between \$13m and \$20m were spe and most of that was in attacks," McCain says

The onslaught was extraordinary even I modern campaign standards. Flyers starte appearing on car windshields suggesting l had fathered a black child (an appare reference to Bridget, a Bangladeshi girl who McCain and his wife Cindy adopted). Othe claimed he had committed treason whi imprisoned in Hanoi or was mentally unba ced as a result of his experiences.

His tendency to give straight answers, which charmed voters in New Hampshire, got hi was brewing over whether the Confederate fl: dodged the issue, saying it was purely a matt for the state. McCain waded straight in, tellir the state's white Republicans were not reac-

McCain is clearly determined that should 1

run in 2008, he will not trip up in South Carolina a second time. He has close political allies in the governor's mansion and in the states congressional delegation who have helped him burrish his image there. He has also been more careful than he was in 2000 about what he says about the Christian right. But the what he says about the Christian right. But the senator maintains he has not yet made up his mind about running, and will not until the 2006 congressional elections. "Tellike to know the mood of the country after those elections," he says. "I'dlike to be able to gauge the mood of the country and my chances at that time."

He will then be 70. He remains an extraordinarily dynamic figure for his age, clocking

more international miles than most of his Senate colleagues, but a sear on the left side of his face serves as a reminder that he might have died from skin cancer five years ago had a melanoma not been spotted in time. He is checked every three months for a possible recurrence, His wife, Cindy, recently had a

recurrence. His wite, Unity, recently had stroke, and her health may also be a factor.

Many US Democrats and centrists are trudging towards 2008 without great hopes. The conventional wisdom is that Hillary Clinton will win the Democratic nomination but then lose the presidential election, because she will galvanise the people who hate the Clinton name more than those who love it.

John McCain . . . 'I don't believe in persona attacks or disrespect to people who hold

Many eyes are on John McCain as the sole alternative to a continuation of the Bush revolution. The ideological religious right will be out to stop him, but by 2008, after another few years of ideological battles at home and counterinsurgency abroad, the Republicans could be ready for a change of style.

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL GEISSIN

The Alistair Cooke memorial lecture will be broadcast live. BBC Radio 4 tonight at 8pm and on BBC World Service at 10.30pm (BST) 4 July and ½1.30pm (BST) on 5 July. bbc.co.uk/radio4



Pulitzer prize-winners accused of fraud and competition-fixing who ever said poetry was boring?

he world of American poetry has been ro by scandal over the past two years. It began in April 2004 when an anonymous website, www.Foetry.com, set itself up as the "American Poetry Watchdog" - a dog, as it turned out, with

a nasty bite.

To understand the impact of
Foetry's j'accuse, one should look at how the poet's craft is plied in contemporary America. Commer To understand the impact of

Foetry's j'accuse, one should look at how the poet's craft is plied in contemporary America. Commer cial publishers don't publish the traditional slim volumes any more They never made much money and a tax ruling in 1979, stopping "write-offs" for unsold inventory means that they now inevitably lose money. Nor will the bookstore chains give precious shelf space to new poetry (it's the same with Waterstone's in this country). It doesn't sell To make a career in American

poetry nowadays you must enter poetry contests and work your way up the prestige ladder. The contests are run by university and small press publishers. Thousands of hopefuls enter their manuscripts, paying a fee of around \$25. The publisher is guaranteed a profit. Most contestants are guaranteed to lose. It's like boxing – just as bloodily competitive and, Foetry alleged, just as crooked.

For the winners there are glittering prizes. Take the case of the most garlanded poet in the US today. orie Graham. Now in her mid-50s, Graham began at the bottom in the early 1980s, winning the lowly prizes that got her into print. Her reputation grew, and with it came substantial cash prizes and paid readings. Then, on the strength of her CV, remunerative "creative writing" posts in universities Finally, in the late 1990s, the golden apples; a Pulitzer prize, a MacArthur "genius award" and an endowed chair at Harvard.

In the little world of poetry, Jorie Graham is a giant. Her work will last: dissertations are written on her oeuvre; students, generations hence, will study her poems. She is in the pantheon of greats, with Whitman, Pound, Dickinson and Frost. Professor Graham was also,

Foetry alleged, if not a crook, a prime exemplar of the crookedness of a contest system riddled with "fraud" and "sycophancy". A system, according to Foetry, in which anonymous judges routinely award prizes 'to their students, friends, and even their lovers''. It is

a system in which, Foetry further alleged, "millions of dollars are stolen" (all those \$25 entrance fees). "It's cheating" they raged. "It's criminal. If this was anything other than poetry, the Department of Jus-tice would be all over it." And the Don(na) Corleone of this system? Who else but Jorie Graham. Foetry, as one example among many, picked on a contest in 1995 sponsored by the University of

Georgia Press. The anonymous

judges, one of whom was Grahan many, picked on a contest in 1999 sponsored by the University of Georgia Press. The anonymous judges, one of whom was Graham gave the prize to Peter Sacks. He, as it happened, was in a relationship with Graham. The couple went on to marry a few months later. He now occupies a chair alongside Grahan at Harvard, Suspicious or what? In response to Foetry's charges Graham claimed that she had "recused" herself in that 1999 conaccess. Foetry turned up material claim. Foetry also claimed to have found other instances (some absurdly far-fetched) of Graham

"exposé" leading poetry contests have called (unofficially) the "Jorie Graham" rule. but prominently named. If you know them, don't enter. The

favouring students and friends.

The Foetry scandal grew eyes Another of the website's targets. publisher Janet Holmes, did some digging of her own and "outed" Foetry's anonymous scourge. Mr Daniel-come-to-judgment turned out to be Alan D Cordle, a research librarian in Portland with a contest-entering (but rarely contest-winning) poet wife. I was, as the mafiosi say, "personal" Lawsuits are threatened. A number of conclusions can be

drawn. Most striking is the power of blog. "Watchblogs" like Foetry will play a major role in the futur literary world. Secondly, the unin-volved observer will conclude that Graham got a raw deal. Poetry has always operated by clique. Were it not for Ezra Pound pulling strings TS Eliot's career would never have got airborne. That's how "schools"

of poetry get started - cronyism.
The poetry contestants want a
level playing field? Try football.
The chances of making it into the