

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

McCain might have been last of his kind

Perhaps nothing personifies the late Sen. John McCain better than this episode from his 2008 presidential campaign.

At a campaign rally, a woman said she did not trust Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama because “he’s an Arab.”

McCain, a Republican, quickly responded. “No, ma’am. He’s a decent family man, a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues.”

Ten years later, such civility and such accuracy seem uncommon. McCain, who died Saturday of brain cancer at age 81, might have been the last of his kind. If so, that would be truly unfortunate.

This is not to canonize McCain, or to immediately jump on the bandwagon for renaming the Russell Senate Office Building after McCain, as Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley and others have proposed.

McCain may well be deserving of that honor. But it’s too early to objectively assess his legacy. Indeed, that building where many U.S. senators have their offices is named after a Democratic senator from Georgia — Richard B. Russell, who served from 1933 to 1971 — whose segregationist views and strident opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would be anathema to most people today.

“The history books will be kind to John McCain because our country is so much better for his straight talk, common sense, maverick ways and passionate service,” said former Oregon Sen. Gordon Smith, who served in the Senate



AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin
Cindy McCain, wife of the late Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., lays her head on his casket during a memorial service at the Arizona Capitol.

‘... We weaken our greatness when we confuse our patriotism with tribal rivalries that have sown resentment and hatred and violence in all the corners of the globe.’

with McCain, though they did not always agree, and who now heads the National Association of Broadcasters.

McCain, like the rest of us, was flawed. He made mistakes. But what he did with his life was extraordinary.

A Navy aviator, his fidelity to the U.S. and his courage while a North Vietnamese prisoner of war became the stuff of legend. Elected to Congress in

1982, he was chosen by Arizonans four years later to succeed the equally legendary and erstwhile Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater.

McCain generally was conservative, but like Goldwater, he held broad views that defied simplistic labels.

He teamed with Democrat Russ Feingold to successfully push campaign reform, only to have it partially

undone by the courts. He ardently supported a strong U.S. military while tenaciously fighting pork-barrel spending by the Pentagon. He worked to restore U.S. diplomatic relations with Vietnam, the country that caused him so much pain. He was a leader on immigration reform, which Congress unwisely let fail. He took a chance on a little-known Alaskan governor, Sarah Palin, choosing her as his vice presidential running mate. He voted to uphold Obamacare.

And not to avoid the obvious, in recent times he defied President Donald Trump’s shallow disdain for him.

Character, commitment and a maverick sensibility defined McCain. Let us remember his final words to Americans, released after his death.

“... We weaken our greatness when we confuse our patriotism with tribal rivalries that have sown resentment and hatred and violence in all the corners of the globe. We weaken it when we hide behind walls, rather than tear them down, when we doubt the power of our ideals, rather than trust them to be the great force for change they have always been.

“We are 325 million opinionated, vociferous individuals. We argue and compete and sometimes even vilify each other in our raucous public debates. But we have always had so much more in common with each other than in disagreement. If only we remember that and give each other the benefit of the presumption that we all love our country, we will get through these challenging times. We will come through them stronger than before. We always do. ...”

GUEST COLUMN

What Sen. McCain didn’t do

By PATRICIA MURPHY
CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — When we all look back at the life of Sen. John McCain, it’s easy to focus on all that he did — the sacrifice and victories, the wounds of war and the joy in service. But for me, it was something that McCain chose not to do years ago that I’ll always be grateful for.

It was 2002 and my boss, Georgia Sen. Max Cleland, was in a re-election fight so ugly, many of us on his staff frankly didn’t know how to respond. Would voters really believe that Cleland, a triple amputee from the Vietnam War, was so blindly partisan that he would work against America’s national security and for the Democratic Party instead? That was the accusation against him in the campaign.

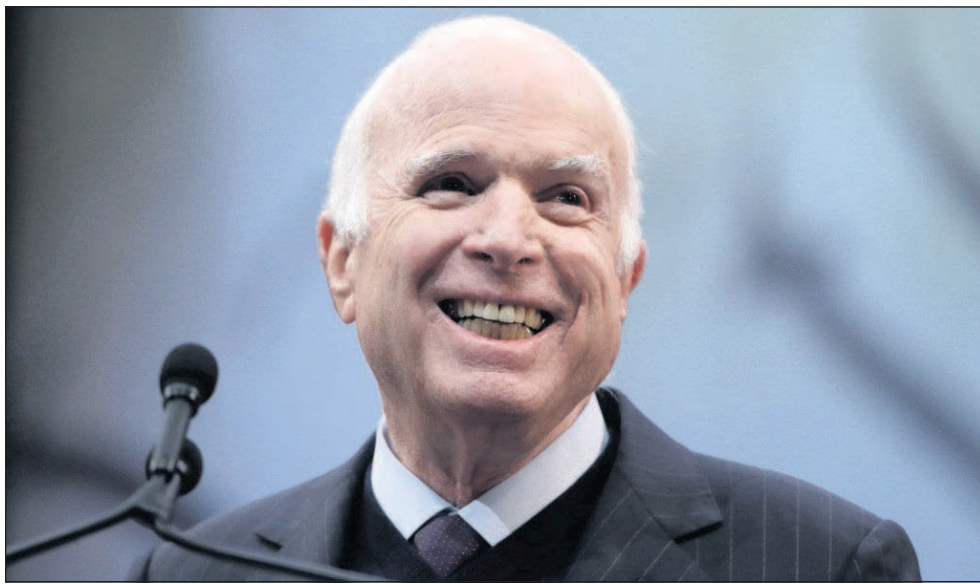
Cleland had been a lifelong Democrat, but routinely partnered with Republicans in Washington, either senators on the Armed Services Committee to fight for men and women in the military, or with House members in the Georgia delegation, to deliver for the state’s needs back home. Especially in the months after 9/11, politics in Washington seemed to fade into the background as members of Congress worked together, urgently and regardless of party, to do whatever they needed to do to protect the country from the attacks that might come next.

It was probably naive at the time to think that the Republicans who had worked so much with Cleland in Washington would not then campaign against him when the next election came around, but that’s exactly what happened. The race tightened and then turned. It was politics, after all, and the goal of politics was to win. Always.

Notable holdout

Except when it came to Sen. John McCain. Unlike other Republicans, he told Cleland he would not campaign against him and he didn’t. Along with fellow Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel (another Vietnam combat veteran), McCain also denounced an attack ad that put photos of Cleland alongside Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein and accused the senator of lying and failing to protect the country at a time of war. While others were silent, McCain spoke out against it. “I’ve never seen anything like that ad,” he told The Washington Post. “It’s worse than disgraceful, it’s reprehensible.”

McCain’s statement didn’t make a major difference in the race. Cleland still lost. But it made a difference to those of us who needed to believe that some things were more important



AP Photo/Matt Rourke
Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., receives the Liberty Medal in 2017 from the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. The honor is given annually to an individual who displays courage and conviction while striving to secure liberty for people worldwide.

than politics and that there were leaders in Washington who believed that, too. McCain, Cleland and Hagel were three of the six Vietnam veterans in the Senate at the time. They all knew the costs of war and the incredible gifts of the country they fought — and could have died — for. For them, every day, nothing was more important than country.

Two years later, McCain did something similar for Sen. John Kerry, who had clinched the Democratic nomination for president when a group of veterans cut an ad attacking his actions during Vietnam. McCain called that ad “dishonest and dishonorable” and said the White House should condemn it. That same year, McCain told Fox News, “John Kerry is a friend of mine. I don’t choose to attack or disparage him and I will not.” He went on: “I know that having a friend in Washington from another party is not acceptable to some in Washington. I have two words for them: too bad.”

I left Capitol Hill after the Cleland race. But thanks to McCain, I didn’t lose my faith in politics or the dignity of public service or the honor in the United States Senate. Today, it’s not only difficult to imagine the Senate without John McCain, I don’t particularly want to try.

Keeping the faith

I’d rather believe that the Senate is still a place where someone believes that some things are more important than politics and that nothing is more important than country. I’d also like to believe that the Senate can stand

up for itself when necessary and will stand up for the American people when required. I want to believe that America is still a country that rewards a person who chooses service over self, instead of the other way around.

With John McCain in the Senate, I knew all of that was true. Without him, the others who fit the bill — and I know they are there — are going to have to raise their hands and make themselves known to the rest of the country. We need to have faith in our leaders as so many had faith in John McCain.

I don’t mean to lionize the senator and there’s no need to. Like all of us, he had plenty of faults. But unlike most, he pointed out his own shortcomings often. And he distinguished himself in today’s politics by stepping away from partisanship when he needed to make room for a path to do what he thought was right.

In his final farewell message Monday, McCain called on Americans to do the same. “We have always had so much more in common with each other than in disagreement,” he wrote. “If only we remember that and give each other the benefit of the presumption that we all love our country we will get through these challenging times.”

McCain embodied that message in all that he did — and didn’t do — in his own life. It’s fitting that his final act of service is to pass it along to the country he loved so much, even in his death.

Roll Call columnist Patricia Murphy covers national politics for The Daily Beast.

LETTERS

McCain is a hero and a loved American

I want to thank the men and women of the military who serve, or have served our country for telling that sad man in the White House that he was wrong. I also thank the members of American Legion for doing the same.

What a mockery to lower the flag half mast, then raise it full. Then, after all the complaints from people in the U.S. and other people of the world, that sad man in the White House lowers it half mast again under pressure from us, the people.

How did this happen to our beloved country? Sen. John McCain is a hero and a loved American. He is a “real man.” May he rest in peace.

A. DIANE FINUCANE
Warrenton

Thank you Sen. McCain, for all you gave us

This may be obvious to some, but I believe it needs to be spoken. I hope Trump supporters can see what most of us knew, or at least felt, before 2016. For the president of the U.S. to say nothing about the passing of Sen. John McCain, not even a “he will be missed” statement, is proof we have a 12-year-old, spoiled-rotten child for a president.

Politics aside, Sen. John McCain has been one of the few men I have been trying to emulate my whole life. He and his actions are one reason I joined the Navy at the age of 16. He never quit. The spirit of his soul and the actions of the man were truly God-given. Rest in peaceful slumber, my hero, and thank you for all you have given us.

TROY HASKELL
Astoria

Why use children in a political ad?

Children. Children are being used in a bedtime story in a political ad. What’s next, mentally disabled people? What happened to Lincoln’s party? The ethics, values, pride, fairness, truth and where to draw the line.

What happened to the people of America, especially Oregonians? We were frontiersmen with courage, integrity and toughness, and now we are using children to get us what we want.

Our newspapers, too. Using the bully pulpit, we read opinions full of conjecture and intimidation.

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