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## The American Conservative

# John McCain Leaves Behind a Hawkish Void

Doug Bandow

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John McCain has left us and left behind the record of a courageous life. But his passing, an obvious tragedy for his family, has been hijacked by Washington's elite, who have used it to attack President Donald Trump. While many of their criticisms have been warranted, the result has been to paint McCain as a veritable secular saint, which he was not.

The great tragedy of McCain's life was his advocacy of war and military intervention at almost every turn. He backed the Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya wars. He urged military strikes on North Korea and Iran. He visited Syrian insurgents to push U.S. intervention. He supported the Saudis' brutal war against Yemen. He urged military action against Nigeria and Sudan. He pushed Washington to confront Russia over Georgia and lamented the lack of military options in Ukraine.

Thankfully he never reached the presidency. Lauded for his foreign policy expertise, his real talent was limited to proclaiming "bomb them" at strategic political moments. For McCain there was little difference between Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Iraq. He didn't "do nuance." War was a first resort, the obvious answer to most any international problem, whatever the specifics. If only Washington would impose its will abroad, Pax America would emerge, despots would flee, democrats would triumph, prosperity would bloom, Kumbaya would be sung, and the lion would lie down with the lamb.

Alas, the transition to peace in our time proved to be messy. Thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of foreigners died in John McCain's wars. Millions of people were displaced. Corrupt and ruthless rulers prospered. Religious minorities were slaughtered and expelled. Enemy states were empowered. Jihadists seized control of cities. Terrorists flourished. Civilians were targeted. America came to realize John Quincy Adams' admonition, attempting to "become the dictatress of the world" and in so doing finding itself no longer "the ruler of her own spirit."

Of course, McCain was not alone responsible for America's permanent state of war. The bipartisan War Party dominates Washington, and, at least until the advent of Donald Trump, it had controlled U.S. policy irrespective of administration. Presidents might disagree on details and be more or less enthused about loosing the dogs of war, but in a crunch they inevitably unleash the military. No past failures have deterred them from future attempts.

Still, McCain may have been the single most influential of the Senate's unofficial horsemen of the apocalypse. His personal story, including years of captivity in Vietnam, gave him unique credibility. So did his mythical independence and reputation as a "maverick" (based on a couple well-publicized divergences from Republican orthodoxy), his strategic suborning of the Washington press corps, and his indefatigable determination that the U.S. should never be at peace so long as it had a plane, ship, or soldier available for combat. Through Democratic and Republican administrations, he campaigned for war.

The good news is that there is no one to replace him. South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham lacks McCain's experience and gravitas. Unlike McCain, Graham cannot say that he knew war; rather, he knew a guy who knew war. He was McCain's faithful sidekick but only that. Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas is no less irresponsible than McCain, but never became the constant media presence. When Cotton speaks, Washington thankfully does not listen.

Senator Jim Inhofe is likely to take over the Senate Armed Services Committee chairmanship. He is traditionally conservative and hawkish, and believes the budget of the Pentagon should be without limit. But he is two years older than was McCain and is better known for his skepticism of climate change than as an advocate for promiscuous war-making.

Senator Bob Menendez has gained a reputation as a reliable but not particularly articulate hawk. Notably, he is a Democrat, as was the now-retired Joe Lieberman, a reliable McCain ally. However, Menendez has been bedeviled by charges of impropriety and might not survive the November election.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has held Republicans together for many dubious militaristic causes, perhaps none worse than having the armed services continue to act as a bodyguard for the Saudi royals, aiding them in their dirty work against helpless, impoverished Yemen. However, legislating for war is not the same as being a celebrated spokesman for a series of mini-Armageddons.

The House has yielded no similarly celebrated advocates of war here, there, and everywhere. Members face the voters more often and have trouble collecting similar press attention. Moreover, with congressmen under far more pressure to satisfy constituents, another international crusade in which average folks find their loved ones coming home in boxes is not likely to be a big vote winner.

In short, the subtraction of John McCain's voice from Washington's incessant warmongering Greek Chorus will reduce pressure on the president to bomb, invade, and occupy more countries. How much difference that will make in practice is hard to assess. After all, the president's own mercurial, unprincipled approach so far has yielded persistent support for ongoing wars without

initiating any new ones. Moreover, Trump has within his administration uber-hawks as bad as McCain, most notably National Security Advisor John Bolton.

Still, McCain's death creates an opportunity for new and improved Republican Party foreign policy spokesmen to emerge. Senators Rand Paul and Mike Lee and Congressman Justin Amash have been advocating an approach more consistent with the GOP's purported commitment to limited government and individual liberties. Others who might have been intimidated by McCain's angry personality may feel freer to express skepticism of Washington's conventional wisdom.

The pressure to find peaceful alternatives will only increase as Uncle Sam's bankruptcy grows more imminent. Demonstrating that Republicans care no more about fiscal responsibility than Democrats, the current administration and Congress have simultaneously hiked outlays and reduced revenues, pushing this year's deficit towards \$1 trillion. Absent responsible fiscal reform, red ink will continue to accumulate at a prodigious pace. And fiscal pressures will grow even worse as Social Security and Medicare spending explodes to meet the aging population.

The 81-year-old McCain had few financial worries, but many others of his generation do. And they are not likely to accept cuts to their benefits to finance defense subsidies for rich allies or underwrite military expeditions to remake failed societies. However enthusiastic wannabe generals such as Lindsey Graham might be, the appeal of further Middle Eastern adventures has fallen over the years.

As pressure to cut spending rises, so will reluctance to provide foot soldiers for a new American empire. Those of military age have shown less enthusiasm for the unending neoconservative crusades initiated by their elders. Even now it is increasingly difficult to find qualified young people willing to serve in the armed forces. Proposals to sort out foreign civil wars will become ever less popular. Peace, rather than socialism, might become the signature issue for the young.

The end of the Cold War provided America with an opportunity to become a normal country again, in which the security and prosperity of its own people became the priority of its government. Instead, following 9/11, neoconservatives and other hawks hijacked U.S. foreign policy. Their control now looks less certain with the death of John McCain. It's time for all good Republicans to come to the aid of their party, and, more importantly, their country, by rediscovering what George W. Bush briefly described as a more "humble" foreign policy.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*