



## John McCain Loved the Military Too Much

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John McCain was a brave man, from the time he spent as a prisoner of war in Vietnam to his final battle against cancer. May he rest in peace.

However, his public career warrants a harsher judgment, and it is worth bidding farewell to the kind of aggressive, militarized foreign policy he championed, too. McCain was an unlikely leader of the Senate's pro-war caucus. He suffered in the Vietnam War, which was both mistakenly and incompetently waged. He presciently opposed President Ronald Reagan's disastrous intervention in the Lebanese civil war, was sometimes skeptical of U.S. involvement in the Balkans, criticized turning Somalia into an exercise in nation building, and denounced the Clinton administration's plans to invade Haiti. These positions suggested a focus on both America's interests and its capabilities.

However, in his last few decades in the Senate, he turned into one of its most ferocious advocates of military intervention, almost irrespective of circumstance. McCain favored aggressive war against Serbia, an endless crusade to bring democracy to Afghanistan, the disastrous invasion of Iraq, the equally counterproductive destruction of Libya, a combat role in Syria's horrific civil war, and military aid for Saudi Arabia in its brutal aggression against Yemen. He recklessly promoted Georgia against Russia in those two countries' short-lived war, advocated striking North Korea militarily, and sang about bombing Iran in a little ditty set to the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann." He proposed creating a no-fly zone in Sudan and intervening in Nigeria against the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram. Last year, he urged the Trump administration to "choose the Kurds" over Iran and Iraq, since for decades the United States "has protected them from attacks, both from within and outside Iraq." Ukraine was a disappointment, causing him to lament: "I do not see a military option, and that is tragic."

In other words, he tended to treat war as just another policy option, an answer to any number of problems, from the mundane to the monstrous, even when U.S. security was not seriously

threatened. In most of the conflicts in which he favored involvement, U.S. intervention worsened the resulting humanitarian tragedy.

In all of them, Washington spent American lives and resources and created enemies without achieving its foreign-policy objectives and, in some cases, making their attainment less possible.

The Iraq War, for instance, predictably unleashed a virulent insurgency and sectarian conflict. That, in turn, spawned the Islamic State, which spread death and destruction across the region. The Iraq invasion also enhanced Iran's regional influence, exacerbating a problem that McCain believed warranted military action. Similarly, Riyadh's assault on Yemen, intended to reinstate a pliable ruler there, actually empowered al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group's most active regional affiliate, and other radical organizations as well.

Routine war-making made the United States a threat to be feared—and countered—by other nations. Intervening in Libya after it negotiated away its weapons of mass destruction discouraged other so-called rogue regimes from making deals with Washington. North Korea, in particular, saw the need for more than paper guarantees and verbal assurances. And turning U.N. authority to protect civilians into an opportunity for regime change, as appeared to happen in Libya, taught China and Russia not to trust U.S. assurances in the future.

Alas, experience did not change McCain's mind. Eventually he did admit that Iraq—which was supposed to be a cakewalk—was a terrible mistake but claimed that as president he would have discovered the poor intelligence and avoided the war. However, even his Iraq *mea culpa* proved merely rhetorical, at least judging by his enthusiasm for participating in the next war and the others that followed. Last year, he issued a plan to increase U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan. He imagined the mistake in Libya was failing to help “Libyans build national institutions where none existed,” as if the country's victorious military factions desired U.S. tutelage. He advocated ever more military involvement in Syria and support for the Saudis in Yemen despite the catastrophic course of those conflicts.

Indeed, McCain was never one for bringing conflict to a speedy end. In his 2018 book, *The Restless Wave*, he declared that “the way to shorten a war is to make clear to the enemy you're going to do whatever it takes for as long as it takes to defeat them.” That is, the only way to win is by committing to stay indefinitely. Indeed, as Iraq imploded, he advocated years more combat despite what he admitted would be the high cost in lives and wealth; he later urged an occupation of 100 years if necessary. He pushed an equally endless commitment for Afghanistan. But winning would never be worth as much to Americans, who have nothing much at stake as do Afghans and Iraqis.

At the same time, McCain overestimated the willingness of foreigners to follow America's lead. While running for president, he cited “the central role the United States must play in shaping [the world] for the future.” Naturally, the United States “must lead in the 21st century.” He defined success in Afghanistan and Iraq as “the establishment of peaceful, stable, prosperous, democratic states that pose no threat to neighbors and contribute to the defeat of terrorists.” Yet locals with AK-47s and roadside bombs had a different vision, and after years of war Washington has still

failed to meet McCain's test. Good intentions are not enough to transcend history, culture, religion, ethnicity, geography, ideology, and, especially, the determination to rule oneself.

McCain often framed his readiness to go to war in terms of democracy and human rights. But that was largely rhetorical.

In truth, he promoted a potpourri of dubious opposition groups: the infamous but well-funded Mujahadin-e-Khalq, long designated as a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department; the Kosovo Liberation Army, which turned out to be an architect of ethnic cleansing after its victory; and various radical Syrian factions, which envisioned anything but a liberal society. After jumping in to the war in Libya, he eventually acknowledged human rights abuses by the victorious rebels, whom he previously termed "my heroes."