

# WASHINGTON **Examiner**

## **McCain's policies were questionable, but his prescience was not**

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In death, John McCain received the honors reserved for a president, departed from the public eye a generation ago or more. McCain never left the arena, before the often tacky bloodsport of American politics paused to observe the passage of his hearse.

It must have been jarring to watch, for Americans who have spent years disliking him for one reason or another. His most “maverick” stances brought him a reputation as a “warmonger” among liberals and the enmity of social conservatives. But the Arizona Republican was wiser in his most controversial moments than people cared to admit. More importantly, McCain was one of the few federally elected officials to respect the office that he held — with its power and responsibility — and, also, to respect himself enough to believe that he could perform those duties, even when it was difficult.

McCain was elected to the Senate in 1987, giving him a role in all the most tumultuous domestic and international storylines of the past generation. His first Supreme Court confirmation battle was that of Robert Bork, the judge whose defeated nomination initiated our current era of total political warfare over the judiciary as part of an increasingly high-stakes culture war.

Beyond American shores, the Soviet Union was unraveling, rendering obsolete much of American grand strategy of the previous 40 years.

It was on these two issues — foreign policy and judicial conflicts — where McCain would be most willing to defy presidents and short-term political trends. He might have made his own mistakes, but at least he foresaw where the great game would be played in the post-Cold War era.

### **'Warmonger'**

While some intellectuals watching the fall of the Berlin Wall fell in love with the idea of “the end of history,” McCain saw scary ways that American history might still end, at the hands of rogue nuclear states or rising new powers. His doomsaying contributed to his reputation as “a warmonger”, but that was a caricature. The inaccuracy of that charge can be seen from, of all things, a polemic against the 2008 GOP presidential nominee written by a vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute.

The author acknowledged that McCain had opposed President Ronald Reagan's deployment of Marines to Lebanon, backed President George H.W. Bush's invasion of Iraq "only after an initial period of agonizing reluctance," and proved "unrelentingly hostile" to Bush and later President Bill Clinton's intervention in Somalia.

But McCain drew criticism for many other aggressive proposals: He wanted airstrikes against North Korea's nuclear program in 1993 and derided Clinton's 1994 deal with the Kim regime as "all carrots and no sticks." He supported multiple interventions in the Balkans. He voted to invade Iraq and played a lonely leading role in advocating for the surge of 2007. The Cato critique also faults McCain for "lumping [Iran, Syria, and North Korea] together as rogue states" and for his "confrontational positions" towards Russia and China.

Stipulate, for argument's sake, that McCain was wrong about the Balkans, if only because it helped Russian President Vladimir Putin argue to his domestic audience that Western powers intend to dominate and perhaps destroy Russia. (Although, to be fair, the man who displayed, in his post-Soviet office, a portrait of Peter the Great at the height of his imperial power probably didn't need much encouragement to take a confrontational posture towards the West.)

The 2003 invasion of Iraq was also a major strategic error, albeit one driven by intelligence community failures that ensnared most American and British leaders.

Ten years on, his assessment of threats, unfortunately, looks correct: North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles that can strike any city in the United States, in part because successive administrations made up-front concessions in exchange for breakable and soon-broken promises.

The Kim regime sells chemical weapons paraphernalia to Syria, according to the United Nations, while Iranian forces have deployed to prop up Syrian dictator Bashar Assad and expand their terror networks in the region.

McCain had the integrity to advocate for the successful troop surge of 2007, even though he knew the Iraq War would be an albatross for his 2008 presidential bid. (Disclosure: My brother was a junior staffer for McCain's campaign during the primary season, although I never mentioned it to the senator and he never appeared to make the connection.) "I would rather lose a campaign than a war," he said at the time.

McCain was ahead of the curve on Russia, too.

Whereas President George W. Bush met with Putin and thought he'd gotten "a sense of his soul," McCain perceived Putin's orchestration of "a creeping coup" to establish a regime "trending towards neo-imperialism abroad and authoritarian control at home." That was 2003. He worried about Russian interference in Georgia's elections and its malign influence on Ukraine. In 2007, Putin invaded Georgia.

Then-Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., trounced McCain in the 2008 presidential campaign, before deciding to give Putin a "reset" button. That appeared to work, for a few years; but, then, in 2014, Russian forces annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine. And every so often, the Kremlin is shocked — shocked! — to find that another Russian journalist or opposition leader, often a critic of Putin's foreign policy or domestic corruption, has been murdered or otherwise died an untimely death.

Looking further east, McCain urged Bush not to attend the 2008 Olympics in Beijing due to China's human rights abuses. Bush made the trip, thinking it important to "remain engaged with China and understand that we can have a cooperative and constructive, yet candid, relationship." Today, the Chinese Communists are running a region-wide concentration camp in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Tight control over potential dissidents makes it easier for China to implement an expansionist agenda in opposition to the United States, some lawmakers now believe.

McCain argued for years that China's military modernization was designed as a threat to American interests. That didn't stop Congress from slashing defense spending through sequestration in 2011, as a consequence of failing to compromise on other fiscal issues. U.S. intelligence officials now describe Chinese President Xi Jinping as waging "a cold war" against the United States. China is militarizing artificial islands in the South China Sea, having seized the ground by degrees; the Communist power is building a deep-water naval fleet that lawmakers fear could soon dock in ports from Sri Lanka to El Salvador.

China, Russia, North Korea, Iran — McCain's alarm about each of these adversaries has come into fashion in D.C.

Granted: The Iraq War and its aftermath fostered a deep cynicism in the U.S. and helped drive a perception that intimate U.S. involvement around the planet is not worth it. Overreaches like Iraq undermined McCain's credibility in ensuing crises, such as Syria. Maybe his plans for confronting some of those threats were also misguided.

But we would have been well-served to have more lawmakers with the courage to remain alert for the threats ahead. Instead, too many of his colleagues have been content to take their cues from the White House; party allies put the most supportive spin possible on whatever the president does, while the opposition flogs petty controversies in a bipartisan agreement to avoid any heavy lifting.

### **Gang of 14**

On the culture wars and judicial battles, McCain also bucked his party in a move that was condemned, but which looks prescient today.

It was 2005. Democrats had blockaded a platoon of George W. Bush's appellate court nominees, most notably Miguel Estrada, in part because they wanted to thwart Bush's hopes of making history by appointing the first Latino Supreme Court justice.

Then-Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., prepared to eliminate the filibuster for all judicial nominations, even though he would have to break the rules of the Senate to change them. McCain intervened, leading a group of seven Republicans and seven Democrats who agreed to drop the filibusters of most nominees and avert the nuclear option, as well. Conservatives vilified him. He had deprived Bush and the Republican party of a quick path to valuable wins.

Senators in both parties spent the next decade demonstrating their own hypocrisy. Look at how angry the GOP was when Democrats eliminated the filibuster for lower court judges in 2013 and how Democrats winced when Republicans paid them back during the fight over Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch's confirmation. Now, it's hard for either side to deny that saving the filibuster in 2005 was the right thing to do.

You could see this as part of a larger McCain effort to preserve the institutional prerogatives of the Senate and compete with the executive branch for political power. A balkanized Congress and a runaway executive — these twin maladies have plagued Washington in the modern era.

### **A mirror of our politics**

And so, McCain's career reveals the problem of American politics; he dominated the media spotlight and cast a shadow over a decaying Congress.

Politicians tend to be a weird kind of specialist; they're experts in whatever controversy is under way in a given week and the instructions they've received for surviving it. Most of them lack the self-confidence to do anything else. They bring to mind adolescents walking around in their parents' suits.

Not McCain. It wasn't "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" with him, but at least he wasn't terrified of a bad news cycle.

It's hard to write a tribute to anyone, especially a public figure, that rings true all the way. Every person has flaws; every politician makes foolish decisions and distasteful compromises. But one moment has stood out for years as proof of McCain's rarity. It was during the 2008 election, at the Saddleback Presidential Forum. Pastor Rick Warren blindsided each candidate by asking them to identify their "greatest moral failure." McCain stalled for a moment. And then, he gave a straight answer.

Some people can go their whole lives without looking themselves in the mirror, much less looking someone else in the eye and saying what they've seen. McCain did it on national television, in the stretch run of a presidential campaign.

John McCain is dead. His sins have died with him. We should hope that his virtues have not.