

# QUARTZ

## John McCain's uniquely enduring importance in US politics

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The news that Arizona senator John McCain has been diagnosed with a form of brain cancer that's nearly always fatal has sparked an outpouring of good wishes from Washington DC and beyond. The 80-year-old Republican has served in Congress for 30 years, and along the way has built a reputation that has reverberated far beyond the corridors of the US Capitol.

McCain has been thought of as a maverick, but also as a divisive figure, especially during the latter part of his career. His decision to pick Sarah Palin, then an Alaskan governor untested on the national stage, as a running mate in the 2008 presidential campaign helped to fan the flames of the culture wars that created the US's deeply divided political climate today. The conservative Cato Institute dubbed him an "überhawk" more dangerous on military matters than former US president George W. Bush.

McCain has already said he won't serve another term in the Senate after this one ends in 2022. As he heads to treatment that could last weeks or months, it is clear that his absence will be keenly felt in the US Congress and beyond. Here's what will be missed:

### **His tradition of service**

Before McCain was a politician for three decades, he was a Naval officer for 22 years. As the notion of what "public service" really means in America is being analyzed anew in the Trump era, McCain's war-hero background provides a stark contrast to that of the US president.

In May of 1973, McCain detailed his five years in captivity during the Vietnam War in a long, first-person article in US News. He writes of torture at the hands of Vietnamese guards, of solitary confinement and the depression and despair that went along with it. In several instances, he is given the chance to leave before other captured US soldiers because of his father's position in the military, but refuses special treatment. He wrote:

...the guards, who were all in the room—about 10 of them—really laid into me. They bounced me from pillar to post, kicking and laughing and scratching. After a few hours of that, ropes were put on me and I sat that night bound with ropes. Then I was taken to a small room. For punishment they would almost always take you to another room where you didn't have a

mosquito net or a bed or any clothes. For the next four days, I was beaten every two to three hours by different guards. My left arm was broken again and my ribs were cracked.

### **His reassurance to the US's allies and military overseas**

The Trump administration's dealings with the US's closest military allies have been unorthodox at best, and sometimes downright antagonistic. In recent months, McCain has quietly played a sort of shadow foreign-secretary role, leading groups of Congressional members around the world, mopping up after Trump and his secretary of State.

In February, for instance, after Trump lashed out at Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull in a phone call, McCain called the Australian ambassador in the US to reassure him about his "unwavering support for the US-Australia alliance." He also praised the "universal values" of Nato in Munich.

He visited Ukraine in March, to show support for the country as it battles Russian propaganda and Russia-backed troops, traveled through Asia in April, and stopped in Australia in May, where he said China was acting like a "bully" in the South China Sea. It was once a commonly stated US view to reassure US allies in the region, but hasn't been stated by Trump, who has bragged about his personal relationship with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

In July, McCain was among a handful of senators to visit US troops in Afghanistan.

### **His criticism of the Trump administration**

McCain withdrew his support for Trump's presidential campaign after the infamous "grab 'em by the pussy" video emerged last October, but has voted in line with the Trump administration's position 90.5% of the time, according to Fivethirtyeight. Still, that puts him in the lower tier, support-wise, of most Republicans, who have mostly voted consistently with Trump on his cabinet picks, for example.

McCain's criticism of Trump's unorthodox actions as president has only become more pointed in recent weeks. He suggested Democrats should be "going after Trump for not telling the truth," and that former US president Barack Obama was better at projecting US leadership overseas.

What's the point of a critical voice that still mostly votes in line with what the White House wants? A pack mentality dominates in Washington, with most members of Congress reluctant to be the first to come out and say something negative about a sitting president from the same party. McCain's statements often cleared the way for other Republicans to be critical as well of an administration that is veering far outside the norms of presidential behavior and ethical conduct.

### **His push for less ugly politics**

As news of McCain's illness spread overnight in the US, one of the most-spread items on social media was a clip of him from the 2008 presidential campaign, pushing back against the right-wing conspiracy theory that Obama was an "Arab" and someone Americans should be "scared" of.

McCain took the microphone from a woman at one of his campaign events who said she couldn't trust Obama because he was an Arab: "No, ma'amm" McCain replied. "He's a decent family man [and] citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues and that's what this campaign's all about." (Yes, his awkward wording suggests it would be difficult to be both an Arab and a decent family man, but in the heat of a campaign veering into viciously racist rhetoric, his message was seen as a largely positive one.)

### **His vote in the Senate**

Republicans currently control the Senate with just 52 seats. Without McCain's vote, their already shaky plan to repeal and replace, or maybe just repeal, Obamacare becomes virtually impossible. (Democrats and independents have voted unilaterally against repealing the bill.)

Three Republican senators have ruled out voting for repealing the plan with no replacement, and McCain himself was pushing for a bipartisan approach to healthcare reform.

Without McCain, the Trump administration may also have a harder time pushing through conservative nominees for executive positions, and a proposed federal budget that would slash social services.

As chairman of the Senate Armed Services committee, McCain earned a reputation as a sharp-tongued examiner of Pentagon expenditure, while also pushing for bigger budgets. On Tuesday the committee will begin a hearing on plans to expand the US Navy to 355 ships, which is expected to cost over \$100 billion a year to build and operate. While McCain is undergoing treatment, senator Jim Inhofe from Oklahoma is expected to head the committee.

There's little doubt that McCain will be back in office after treatment. As John Dingell, the former representative from Michigan, wrote, McCain is "sharp as hell and tougher than a \$2 steak. I look forward to catching up with him soon."