

Why the US ruling class mourns John McCain

Patrick Martin
27 August 2018

There is a well-known saying, of murky Latin origin, that one should not speak ill of the dead. But when the death of an individual becomes the occasion for such universal glorification by the political establishment and the media, as with Senator John McCain of Arizona, a correction is in order. This is especially necessary since the newly deceased had such a lengthy record as a militarist and supporter of political reaction, and the further promotion of such policies is the transparent purpose of the hosannas being sung in his praise.

The Sunday television interview programs on five networks devoted the bulk of their coverage to McCain's life and career and to fond reminiscences by well-heeled journalists and big-business politicians, Democratic and Republican. "Meet the Press" host Chuck Todd noted that McCain was the single most-interviewed person on the program, appearing 73 times in his 36-year political career.

McCain was a right-wing Republican, but the loudest tributes to his political record are coming from Democrats. Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer proposed renaming the US Senate's Russell Office Building. Instead of Richard Russell of Georgia, a Democratic Party defender of Jim Crow segregation, the building would now be named after a Republican defender of wars in Vietnam, Central America, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, etc.

Speaking on ABC's "This Week," House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said, "Right now I'm just heartbroken. I think America's in tears about the loss of this great man." Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted, "John McCain was an American hero, a man of decency and honor and a friend of mine. He will be missed not just in the US Senate but by all Americans who respect integrity and independence."

In yet another characteristic display of lickspittling subservience to the ruling elite, "socialist" Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted: "John McCain's legacy represents an unparalleled example of human decency and American service. As an intern, I learned a lot about the power of humanity in government through his deep friendship with Sen. Kennedy. He meant so much, to so many. My prayers are with his family."

What does John McCain's "legacy" consist of? How did he provide "an unparalleled example of human decency and American service"?

McCain spent four years in the House of Representatives and 32 years in the US Senate, but it would be impossible to cite a single piece of legislation with which he was associated that benefited the broad mass of the American people. As far as domestic affairs were concerned, he was best known for voting (in the House) against the bill that established a national holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In the Senate, he was the lone Republican among the "Keating Five," senators who lobbied federal regulators on behalf of savings and loan swindler Charles Keating in 1987.

The political embarrassment caused by this episode, in which McCain narrowly avoided sanctions by the Senate Ethics Committee, led to his involvement in a decade-long effort to establish at least token limitations on corporate contributions to political campaigns. But the McCain-Feingold bill, as it became known, was ultimately gutted by the Supreme Court, which rejected most limitations on corporate purchasing of legislators as an infringement on "free speech." Throughout his career, McCain was a reliable vote for the Republican right—for the Gramm-Rudman Act to slash federal social spending, for the impeachment conviction of President Bill Clinton, and for (with a few exceptions) measures to deregulate business and cut taxes for the wealthy.

The overriding feature of McCain's career, however, was his reflexive hawkishness on foreign policy. He supported war after war, intervention after intervention, always promoting the use of force as the primary feature of American foreign policy, and always advocating the maximum allocation of resources to fuel the Pentagon. In his honor, after his diagnosis with brain cancer made it clear that he was unlikely to survive this year, his Senate colleagues named the 2018 version of the Pentagon budget bill the John McCain National Defense Authorization Act.

McCain's identification with militarism began with his family background: his father and grandfather were both admirals and now have US Navy warships named after them. McCain graduated from the Naval Academy and became a pilot, leading to his capture in Vietnam and five-and-a-half years of imprisonment. No doubt the circumstances he faced there were very difficult, but any sympathy must be tempered by the fact that he became a POW after dropping bombs on largely defenseless people, making him a front-line participant in one of the greatest war crimes in history, the savage American onslaught on Vietnam.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in a commentary published after McCain sought to lecture the Vietnamese in 2000 about their political and economic policies:

While McCain gives sermons to the Vietnamese, let us recall that American military forces carried out mass executions, bombed civilians, defoliated half the country, carried out rape and torture, burned villages, shot children, threw prisoners out of helicopters and cut off the ears of people both alive and dead, keeping them as mementos and trading them for cans of beer. Not every soldier perpetrated such crimes individually, of course, but the military intervention as a whole was of a brutal, anti-democratic, imperialist character, which inevitably found

expression in such sadistic conduct.

Once freed following the Paris agreement between Washington and Hanoi, McCain came home a “war hero.” After his first marriage ended in divorce in 1980, McCain married Cindy Lou Hensley, the daughter of a multimillionaire beer distributor in Arizona. Now flush with money, McCain moved to Arizona to begin a career in Republican politics. First elected to the House of Representatives in 1982, he backed the US invasion of Grenada in 1983 and the Reagan administration policy of supporting fascist forces in Central America, including death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala and the contra terrorists at war with Nicaragua (he was on the board of the US Council for World Freedom, the American chapter of the World Anti-Communist League, for several years). After succeeding Barry Goldwater in the US Senate in 1986, he backed the first Bush administration’s invasion of Panama in 1989 and the full-scale American war against Iraq in 1990-91, during which hundreds of thousands of Iraqi conscripts were incinerated by American bombs, rockets and shells.

After some initial reluctance, McCain backed the Clinton administration’s military threats in Bosnia, including the bombing of Serb forces, and then in 1999 cheered the full-scale bombing of Serbia, declaring that the United States could accept no limitation on its military operations in support of its aims in Kosovo: “We’re in it, and we have to win it. This means we have to exercise every option.”

Like virtually every other Democrat and Republican, he supported the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, launching a war that is now approaching the end of its 17th year, the longest in American history.

It was in the second Iraq War that McCain played his most prominent and reactionary role, cosponsoring the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, along with Democrat Joe Lieberman, endorsing the bombing of Iraq, first under Clinton and then George W. Bush, cheerleading the 2003 invasion and then pushing for a more aggressive use of force during the protracted US occupation, culminating in Bush’s “surge” of additional troops in 2006-2007.

McCain was a full-throated supporter of whatever lie the Bush administration chose as the basis of its war propaganda: Saddam Hussein’s alleged ties to terrorism; his possession of “weapons of mass destruction”; the desire to establish “democracy” in Iraq; and finally, the need to preserve “stability,” i.e., to deal with the consequences of the US destruction of Iraq as a functioning society.

Along the way, McCain found time to advocate military action against North Korea in 2003, US intervention in Iran in 2007, and US support for Georgia in the war between Russia and that Caucasian republic in 2008 (when he dispatched his wife Cindy to Tbilisi in a show of support).

Finally, in 2008, McCain won the presidential nomination of the Republican Party. Already in ill health, the 71-year-old nominee displayed his “love of country” by selecting the fascistic nitwit, Sarah Palin, as his running mate.

McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign was defeated, in part because of popular hostility to the war in Iraq, with which he was so identified, and partly because of his failure, during the financial crisis of September 2008, to respond as quickly as Obama to the demands of Wall Street for a full-scale federal bailout of the banks.

Throughout the Obama administration, McCain was a firm supporter of the Democratic president when he used military force, as in Libya, or threatened it, as in the South China Sea, and a critic when Obama

pulled back, as in Syria. McCain and John Kerry introduced a Senate resolution to sanction the war in Libya, and McCain called for US air power to be used in “a heavier way.” In September 2013, McCain backed a resolution passed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to give US support to military operations in Syria that would “change the momentum on the battlefield” and strengthen forces opposed to the regime of Bashar al-Assad. He repeatedly called for “more boots on the ground” for the US-backed war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

In October 2016, while the Democratic Party was focusing its presidential campaign on alleged Russian “meddling,” McCain authored an op-ed column published in the *Wall Street Journal* in which he indicted Russia for having “slaughtered countless civilians” in Syria through “relentless indiscriminate bombing.” There was no little irony in the former bomber of North Vietnam denouncing Russia for doing a tiny fraction of the damage inflicted by the “shock and awe” campaign in Iraq, which led to one million deaths and which McCain supported enthusiastically.

We have noted the embrace of McCain’s legacy by his supposed opponents in the Democratic Party. This is not merely the result of McCain’s support for the bogus allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US elections, peddled by the Democrats and much of the military-intelligence apparatus. More than a decade ago, in the summer of 2004, there were back-channel discussions between Kerry and McCain, in which the Democratic nominee suggested the formation of a bipartisan presidential ticket, with McCain running as his vice-president, to oppose the reelection of George W. Bush. McCain toyed with the idea, but ultimately decided to remain with the Republicans.

In 2007, when his second campaign to seek the Republican presidential nomination was floundering in its initial stages, McCain was interviewed on the “60 Minutes” program on CBS about the mounting opposition to the war in Iraq. “At what point do you stop doing what you think is right and you start doing what the majority of the American people want?” he was asked. McCain responded, “I disagree with what the majority of the American people want.” The *Wall Street Journal* hailed this response—which essentially rejected popular sovereignty as the basis of democracy—as “McCain’s Finest Hour.”

It is this absolute commitment to the defense of American imperialism that endeared McCain to the US ruling elite as a whole and explains the outpouring of adulation over the weekend.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact