

The canonization of John McCain: Media, political establishment turn warmonger into saint

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“I hated my enemies even before they held me captive because hate sustained me in my devotion to their complete destruction and helped me overcome the virtuous human impulse to recoil in disgust from what had to be done by my hand.”—John McCain on the Vietnam War, April 2001

“However heady the appeal of a call to arms, however just the cause, we should still shed a tear for all that will be lost when war claims its wages from us. Shed a tear, and then get on with the business of killing our enemies as quickly as we can, and as ruthlessly as we must.”—John McCain, October 2001

The American media and political establishment are in the middle of a five-day exercise in moral hypocrisy, cant and myth-making surrounding the death of Republican Senator John McCain. The operation involves nearly every news channel, newspaper publication and politician, Democrat and Republican, following a common script in preparation ever since McCain was diagnosed with brain cancer more than a year ago—John McCain, the “American hero,” the “warrior,” the “maverick,” the likes of which the world may never see again.

On Thursday, a ceremony was held in Arizona featuring speeches by former Vice President Joe Biden and others, concluding with the playing of Frank Sinatra’s, “My Way.” From there, McCain’s body was flown by military aircraft to Washington, where it lay in state in the rotunda of the Capitol building yesterday, a distinction accorded to only 30 other people. McCain’s casket was placed on the wooden catafalque originally built for President Abraham Lincoln after his assassination in 1865—only one of the many political obscenities associated with the affair.

Friday was dedicated to speeches from the assembled congressmen, politicians and military officials. McCain was a “generational leader” (Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell); “one of the bravest souls our nation ever produced” (House Speaker Paul Ryan); one of those “who put country first, who prize service ahead of self, who summon idealism from a cynical age” (Vice President Mike Pence). The attitude of the media was summed up by CNN “journalist”

Dana Bash who commented, after it happened to rain as McCain’s coffin was brought up to the US Capitol: “The angels were crying.”

The main memorial service is being held in Washington today, featuring eulogies from former presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, former Secretary of State and war criminal Henry Kissinger and others, before McCain’s body is interred in the ground near the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, on Sunday. Among the pall-bearers in the final scene of the play is actor Warren Beatty, a Democratic supporter and friend of McCain, who will be joined by Biden, ex-Defense Secretary William Cohen, and anti-Putin Russian dissident Vladimir Kara-Murza.

Biden’s speech on Thursday set the tone for what has followed. “My name is Joe Biden,” he began, “I’m a Democrat. And I loved John McCain.” He regarded McCain as “a brother,” Biden said, and while they had “a lot of family fights,” these differences were overshadowed by what they had in common. Biden, vice president for Obama, who defeated McCain in the 2008 elections, was echoing the comments of Obama himself on the 2016 elections—an “intramural scrimmage” between two sides on the same team.

“John’s story is an American story,” Biden declared, “It’s the American story, grounded in respect and decency, basic fairness, the intolerance through the abuse of power. Many of you travel the world, look how the rest of the world looks at us. They look at us as a little naïve, so fair, so decent. We are the naïve Americans. That’s who we are. That’s who John was.”

What can one say about such absurdities? The American government and its military are despised the world over, responsible for inflicting death and destruction in countless countries—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Palestine and many more. This “so decent” government declares the right to kill anyone, invade any country, overthrow any government that gets in its way. The modus operandi of this “so fair” ruling class is that of bullying, threats and violence.

It is with the unbridled use of military force that McCain is most closely associated. He was among the most vociferous and earliest backers of the 2003 Iraq war, the Obama

administration's war against Libya and the CIA-backed operation in Syria. In support of the latter, he infamously traveled to Syria and met with the Islamic fundamentalist organizations spearheading the civil war. He was a strident advocate of aggression against Iran and an adamant opponent of any restriction on the gargantuan US military budget.

The coordinated and choreographed response to McCain's death is determined by definite political considerations. There is, first, the factional conflict within the ruling class, pitting dominant sections of the military-intelligence apparatus against the Trump administration. McCain has played a central role, in alliance with the Democratic Party, in the anti-Russia campaign, aimed at enforcing a more aggressive foreign policy in Syria and against Russia itself. In the media, much has been made of McCain's detailed instructions for his final sendoff from this world, which he reportedly worked on for months, including the demand that Trump not participate.

The Democrats—from Biden and Obama to “left” representatives like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—have seized the opportunity to associate themselves with a figure who throughout his life maintained the closest ties to the military. Always eager to declare their fidelity to this apparatus of violence, the Democrats have elevated McCain, along with former CIA Director John Brennan, into their political pantheon, the better to conduct their opposition to Trump on the most right-wing basis possible.

More fundamentally, the response to the death of McCain is yet another milestone in the rehabilitation of the Vietnam War. From the first days of the Reagan administration, the overcoming of the “Vietnam Syndrome,” i.e., mass popular hostility to military interventions, has been a political imperative of the ruling class. It was George H.W. Bush who, at the end of the first Iraq war in 1991, prematurely declared, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”

The effort to develop a new political psychology to justify permanent and unending war requires a falsification of history. In all the hosannas to McCain's “heroism” in Vietnam, there is not an ounce of critical comment on the character of the war, a barbaric imperialist intervention that killed three million Vietnamese and nearly 60,000 American soldiers. In the ten years between 1961 and 1971, the US military carried out countless atrocities and dumped more than 20 million gallons of toxic chemicals in Indochina, turning a third of Vietnam into a wasteland.

McCain himself was more honest about the nature of the war when he reflected on the experience in 2001. The first quote cited above is from a comment written in April of that year defending former Senator Bob Kerrey after the latter admitted to participating in a death squad attack on the tiny Mekong Delta hamlet of Thanh Phong, in which he and six soldiers under his command killed 21 women, children and elderly men.

Under the headline, “Bob Kerrey, War Hero,” McCain's

defense was an unvarnished justification for war crimes. Much has been made of the fact that McCain came to favor reconciliation with Vietnam and better relations with the country, bound up with the US conflict with China. However, nothing in his statements suggests that he ever regretted the role of the United States in the war. On the contrary. The second quote above, from a *Wall Street Journal* column written by McCain in October of the same year (“There is no substitute for victory”) makes clear that he saw the brutal and systematic violence carried out in Vietnam as the model for the “wars of the 21st century.”

The effort to end the “Vietnam Syndrome” has entailed not only the falsification of history, but the elevation of the place of the military in the political life of the country. The deification of McCain, the military-state man, the “hero warrior,” is part of this. Until the 1990s, soldiers were not referred to as “warriors.” Most veterans of World War I and II, not to mention Korea, did not want to talk about their war experiences, and certainly did not want to put on a military uniform.

Today, the military, along with the intelligence agencies, exercises an ever more dominant role over all American life. The military is embedded in the media, and the media is embedded in it. Politicians, Democrats as much if not more than Republicans, cite their military and intelligence backgrounds as their most important qualifications for office. The universal glorification of the military expresses the hollowing out of American bourgeois democracy under the impact of unsustainable levels of social inequality, a political radicalization among workers and youth, and a deep and abiding fear on the part of the ruling class that its project of imperialist conquest and social counter-revolution will encounter mass resistance.

One final point on the canonization of John McCain. Perhaps the defining feature of the whole operation is its hollowness, its artificial character, its disconnect from the concerns and thoughts of the vast majority of the population. No matter how hard they try to elevate McCain into a political and moral giant, most people don't give a damn about his death. McCain is as dead as a doornail, and he will rapidly fade from popular consciousness. The first anniversary of his death, and all those that follow, will pass unnoticed.



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