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John McCain: Character and Contrast

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

August 26, 2018

With our current leadership bereft of values, Senator John McCain's passing has caused much of America to reflect upon the values that McCain exemplified. Whatever your political persuasion, you cannot look at the life and times of John McCain and not emerge with a sense of inordinate respect.

While John McCain made two serious unsuccessful runs for the White House, his shadow looms over the presidency as no other. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the very men who vanquished McCain in 2000 and 2008, were asked by McCain to eulogize him prior to his burial near his beloved Naval Academy. Both gladly accepted because of the character John McCain exhibited daily in the Congress since 1982, on the campaign trail in his unsuccessful presidential bids, and in the Hanoi Hilton, where he suffered through nearly six years as a Prisoner of War after being shot down in October, 1967.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that "character is destiny," and surely no one exemplified that more than John McCain. McCain's character is the kind to which we can point as an aspiration for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren. John McCain was a "Mensch," described in "*Joys of Yiddish*" as "someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character... 'a real mensch' [having] nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous."

Yes, John McCain was a mensch. And Heraclitus was right, too. McCain's character, the positive McCain characteristics that he personified, forged his destiny, marked his life and carried him through his journey of accomplishment for his nation.

Key among those characteristics, those values, were service, loyalty, independence and forthrightness/truthfulness.

Unfortunately, those characteristics stand in stark contrast to the lack of character and values on the part of the current occupant of the White House.

Service? Nothing speaks better to the sense of service than President John F. Kennedy's admonition that we should "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Whether in the Navy, in the Hanoi Hilton or in the Congress, no one ever doubted that John McCain's life-long service was for his country and his fellow citizens, not for himself. Service. Character.

Loyalty? John McCain did not demand loyalty to him, he provided loyalty to others, demonstrated best when he, the son and grandson of US Navy Admirals, was offered an early release from his cell of cruelty in Hanoi, but refused to go until all of his fellow prisoners were also released with him. Loyalty. Character.

Independence? John McCain's independence was legendary, exemplified by the moniker "maverick." He always tried to do the right thing as he saw it and was not tribal, crossing the aisle repeatedly to conduct the nation's business. Whether with Ted Kennedy, Russ Feingold, Joe Lieberman, Joe Biden and many more, McCain partnered with whomever was necessary to get the job done. Inside the Republican Party he was a voice for what was right, whether as a decent person [defending Barack Obama](#) to campaign zealots who sought to demonize him, or standing against party orthodoxy, like when he cast his late-night thumbs-down vote stopping the repeal of Obamacare. Independence. Character

Forthrightness/Truthfulness? They didn't call his campaign bus the "Straight Talk Express" for nothing. McCain was always available to the press for whatever tough questions they might have. He told the press and the people what he thought, giving no quarter. He didn't hedge or flip flop. He admitted when he had been wrong. He argued for what was right. He didn't say one thing today and something different tomorrow. With John McCain, no one had to count daily lies, you could always count on the truth. Fortrightness/Truthfulness. Character.

While John McCain was honored by a Silver Star, two Legions of Merits, Distinguished Flying Cross, three Bronze Stars, two Purple Hearts, two Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medals, and a Prisoner of War Medal, John McCain most proudly wore the names "citizen" and "Senator." While we would regret the loss of John McCain at any time, we surely regret the loss of this real man of character in today's unfortunate political reality show world. Character and contrast.

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, retired in 2017 after 48 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and occasionally teaches Montana history and contributes to community and economic development projects.

(700 words in the body)