

Codicils for Coffins: Trump vs. McCain

by [G. Murphy Donovan](#) (May 2019)



Ach Herrje Ma Tutto Occupato, Georg Baselitz, 2016

*. . . with silent, lifting mind I've trod
the high untrespassed sanctity of space,
put out my hand and touched the face of God.*

—JG McGee

You might think that the living have the edge in any fight between the living and the dead. Not so if you read dailies

like the *Washington Post*. Apparently, John McCain is punching above his weight, even from the grave, in the feud with Trump. Ironically, McCain is now hero to the same demographic on the American left who once vilified Vietnam GI's as "baby killers" and imperial colonialists.

Withal, martial hero worship is often a remix of more than a few fairy tales.

George Armstrong Custer is a prominent example. He led troopers to a slaughter at Little Big Horn, Montana Territory, out-generaled by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse in June of 1876. Custer is buried under a major general's headstone at West Point when in fact he died ignominiously in Montana Territory as a lieutenant colonel, an example of 19th Century halo spin.

Brevet meant temporary then as it does now.

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Between wife Elizabeth and a shell-shocked US Army, Custer was made a 19th Century hero by acclamation and remains a 7th Calvary icon to this day. Like Custer at West Point, John McCain graduated at the bottom of his class at Annapolis.

Both benefited from the need for trained officers of any kind midst a national crisis. Custer made his early bones as a Civil War *aide de camp*. He was breveted to general officer at age 23 because few northern political appointees of that rank could find the business end of a bayonet.

When quelling a rebellion, some military experience, even West Point schooling, is better than none.

To be clear, when compared to other 19th Century cavalry officers, Custer was no John Mosby. Unlike Mosby, thrice wounded in combat, Custer was a master of self-promotion. Until recently, Custer's Civil War halo had not been tarnished by his subsequent Indian War incompetence.

Most heroes, once cast, are frozen in bronze—and time.

Busted back to Lieutenant Colonel after Appomattox, Custer rode west and into history as a frontier martyr. Had Amerind numbers not been decimated by European diseases in a 400 year genocidal military campaign, Sitting Bull might have retired as governor of Montana.

Like McCain, Custer, even in death, was more politician than soldier.

Military accident records show that John McCain III was a [marginal](#), if not dangerous, pilot. Colleagues testify that just one of McCain's air incidents, before being shot down in

Vietnam, would have grounded any other flyer less well connected.

John McCain used to brag and joke about his cockpit fiascos. But then again, John's daddy was a full admiral in the Pacific, as was his grandfather. This is not to suggest that "Jack" McCain ever favored his son, but such was the reputation of the clan that any dolt on land or sea would have thought twice about putting a McCain on report.

Lt. Commander McCain's behavior as a POW did little to help his reputation as an officer. Granted, he suffered from serious injuries, but those injuries were the result of a forced ejection not mistreatment.

Indeed, North Vietnamese medics and doctors saved John McCain's life, surely before they could have possibly known that he was the CINCPAC's son. His subsequent "[confession](#)" to the NVA, admittedly under duress, was an omen of his future as a loose cannon in the Senate.

To be fair, the senior American POW in Hanoi apparently set the tone for prisoner deportment. Then Commander James Stockdale had concluded that all prisoners were at risk if just one resisted. Stockdale apparently rewrote the Code of Conduct, [especially Article 5](#), on the fly, for chaps like McCain, POWs who broke.

If Hanoi knew that John McCain III was special, you can bet your weekend liberty that every POW also believed that PACOM's

son was special.

To his credit, Admiral Stockdale was one of a few honorable flag officers ever to admit that the Gulf of Tonkin [resolution](#) was based on fake intelligence.

McCain claims that his greatest fear as a prisoner was that his father would hear of his propaganda tape. On another occasion he claimed that he and his dad never spoke of “the confession.”

Even with the Stockdale read on Article 5, there were POWs, true heroes, who were tortured, resisted and followed the Code to the letter no matter what. Several attempted to escape. They never broke.

Who remembers their names?

The last casualty of the Vietnam War may have been the military *Code of Conduct*. Literally and figuratively, McCain wrote the [obituary](#) for the Code.

Few remember Vietnam era POW “resisters” as heroes today. They will never lie in state in Washington, receive national honors, or get buried at a military academy. More than 100 POWs died in captivity. Who remembers their names? More than 50 thousand GIs died in Southeast Asia.

Who remembers their names?

After the Eichmann trial, social philosopher Hannah Arendt, caught flak for a lifetime suggesting that not all prison camp “survivors” were noble or heroic. Indeed, the banality of evil is such that few take the high road when the stakes are life or death. Doing what you have to do to survive another day is precisely the ethic that motivated the Stockdale codicil and McCain’s behavior.

Arendt’s philosophical lament about survivors is another hard truth, a codicil that few politicians or myth makers ever contemplate. Survivor is not a synonym for hero.

Yet John McCain is the iconic Vietnam “hero,” a celebrity? McCain might better be a marker for much that was wrong with the Vietnam War especially the lies and deceit that characterized the pyrrhic ten year struggle from beginning to end. After nearly 50 years, we are still lying to ourselves about Vietnam and McCain.



We remembered McCain, early on, because he was the son and grandson of two iconic Admirals. Junior is remembered today because he found a niche as a political conspirator, another never-Trump hater.

Senator McCain was just a “maverick” the same way that Representative Anthony Weiner was just a showman.

John McCain’s real naval reputation, after release, could be measured against James Stockdale. Stockdale was awarded the Medal of Honor and promoted to Admiral thrice. McCain, in contrast, was assigned to Florida in 1976 as a training officer where he distinguished himself as a geographic bachelor, again an off-base philanderer. He hit his political stride a year later as the US Navy’s “Senate Liaison Officer” where he found a new career, abandoned his first wife and kids, his POW era family, for a second wife, 18 years younger than the first.

Navy brass, starting with his father, had few illusions about John III’s character or potential to lead. If facts matter, McCain wasn’t much of an officer and even less of a gentleman.

We should allow, however, that McCain was faithful to the first law of political beginnings. Arm candy matters. The US Navy was probably glad to be rid of McCain and the US Senate happy to have such a “player” in their midst.

Character deficits are seldom barriers to service on Jenkins Hill.

As a Senator, McCain probably had permanent tenure given his political base, but he did little for his former comrades-in-

arms. Indeed, the Veteran's Administration scandals unfolded on McCain's watch. Worse still, US Navy veterans like McCain and Senator Bob Kerry sponsored legislation to classify and seal POW and Vietnam era debriefing records.

Thanks to McCain and Kerry, many [facts and truths](#) about Vietnam will remain ambiguous until congressional mandarins decide that truth no longer matters.

The great tragedy of McCain's life was that he learned [nothing](#) from his Vietnam experience. He was, to the end, a foreign policy globalist, an interventionist, a coup plotter, and a naïf. Like many regime change zealots in the Obama era deep state, McCain liked to hobnob with neo-Nazis in Ukraine and Muslim fascists in [Libya](#).

Cui bono?



Truth often hurts worse than broken bones or torture. The truth about John McCain has always been a function of myth, ego, politics, publicity, or ambition. McCain may have been last in class, but he was always first in

the hearts of mythmakers.

Much of the nonsense surrounding McCain's naval service was not of his making, but he did little to dismiss any fairy tale

that might burnish his halo. He liked to be thought of as a lady killer and “maverick.” Several other personas were manufactured.

McCain did little to correct the mythological record.

An early slice of hokum was the infamous Hanoi offer to selectively “release” McCain, but not other POWs, an offer that John was said to have gallantly “declined” in solidarity with his prison mates. Myth makers seldom mention that the *release for confessions* offer was made to others too. Truth was, unlike confessing to his captors, McCain never had any power to accept or decline release.

If Hanoi was ever serious about selective parole, they could have dumped McCain or any other POW in Laos, Cambodia, or across the DMZ any day of the week. McCain was a valuable bargaining chip, a propaganda stool. He was released when Ho Chi Minh’s heirs decided, only after Uncle Sam agreed to the big skedaddle from South East Asia.

If McCain had accepted a “daddy’s boy” parole, his prison mates probably would have made him walk the plank to freedom anyway.

A similar bit of [fake news](#), from the *New York Times*, accompanied McCain’s retirement from the Navy. The *Times* claimed that John declined an Admiral’s star on principle to become a politician where he “could do more good.”

If true, then McCain's nomination, or confirmation to admiral, would be a matter of public record. Candidates for flag rank are selected annually by a board of admirals and confirmed by Act of Congress. A politician might reject a nomination for admiral, but they do not nominate flag officers.

John's father died on 22 March 1981; Junior was out of flag shade, and out the US Navy, a few days later.

Both of McCain's illustrious ancestors were buried under modest headstones at Arlington National Cemetery. Senator McCain, like Custer, was interred at the military school house. In the beginning John was never a sailor's sailor. In the end, he was even less of a man.

The last act in any drama is always a lot like the first.

At the vote for repealing the *Affordable Health Care Act*, then Senator McCain demonstrated his contempt for party and president by casting the decisive no vote in the well of the Senate, with a dramatic hand signal for a national audience. The manner, not substance of that soap opera, that thumbs down gesture, was literally the equivalent of giving a very public middle finger to the Commander-in-Chief.

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At 80 years of age, Junior was still behaving like a petulant ensign.

When John ran for president in 2008, he chose a woman, a cynical choice given his history with that sex. Such a choice might have made “herstory,” had McCain won against Obama. When a hostile press pilloried Sarah Palin as a lightweight, McCain did little then or later to defend his running mate.



One last cheap shot across Sarah's bow was another codicil to McCain's casket. Governor Sarah Palin was 'publically' [disinvited](#) to Junior's funeral.

Sarah called it a “gut punch.” Well she might.

McCain and his kin were small and mean-spirited to the end, hoping that myth-makers would assume that Palin was the reason for McCain's presidential fail. The Palin insult extended to

the sitting president too. Albeit, McCain's family had little power to tell the CINC what event could not attend.

President Trump made a hero's funeral possible for McCain and yet the CINC was not welcome at a lesser man's memorial service?

No irony here, McCain's contempt for the man in the White House was personal, with origins as far back as 1999, when Trump expressed some skepticism about McCain's "hero" stature. Subsequently, McCain ran for president and lost in 2008 to a tepid Barack Obama whilst Trump came from nowhere in 2016 to rout a host of Republicans and heir-apparent Hillary Clinton, "the most qualified woman" on the American left.

Ouch!

McCain, like many Americans, never recovered from his 2008 defeat or the 2016 Hillary fiasco. With malice and years of fore thought, John became point man for the anti-Trump camp within the American hard right.

Political contempt often morphs into treachery or treason. Thus it was with McCain. John III volunteered for the anti-Trump Republican caba from the start. Indeed, when McCain went public against the president, he became a confirmed media hero.

Like John Brennan, James Clapper, and James Comey; McCain had

a hand in circulating, thus validating, the notorious Russian “[dossier](#)” on Trump, the “insurance policy conspiracy,” a botched partisan hatchet job.

Two years of Mueller investigations never found any evidence to support the dossier or “collusion” with Russia. Withal, McCain and his conspiracy zealots, since 2016, did more damage to national security institutions in America than any Russian could ever imagine.

Whence trust?

Faith in federal institutions, once lost, is not refundable.

As we judge politicians like Trump and McCain, electoral winners and losers, we should remember that good and great are not synonyms. McCain was neither.

Alas President Trump, unlike McCain, has the opportunity to be one or the other, maybe not both. McCain was always a little man and remained so to his grave. In contrast, President Trump was the bigger man after McCain died.

Trump allowed national honors that exceeded merit by any measure.

If you still believe that Senator John McCain was a hero, then

you should also believe that Senator Richard Blumenthal is a war hero too, a Vietnam era Marine “combat” [veteran](#).

Memorial

This essay is dedicated to Colonels Edwin [Atterberry](#) and William [Gibson](#), USAF. Ed was shot down over North Vietnam, taken captive, then killed by the NVA after several escape attempts. Gibson flew in harm’s way too and lived to fight another day. “Hoot” Gibson died a few years ago in the loving arms of his wife and children.

Angel Fire indeed!

Having slipped the “surly bonds,” Ed and Hoot are wingmen again. God speed two real heroes.

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G. Murphy Donovan writes about the politics of national security. As a junior officer, the author was a PACAF Intelligence (POW matters) briefer to CINCPAC, Admiral “Jack” McCain II, John McCain’s dad, on several occasions. After the war, he also had the honor of visiting and chatting with James Stockdale when that flag was at the helm at the Naval War

College. The author served two tours on the ground in Vietnam, the first during the Tet Offensive (1967-1968) and a second short tour for the invasion of Cambodia (1970).

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