

# The Essential John McCain



By **David Brooks**

Oct. 19, 2017

It turns out that John McCain's most important service to American democracy was not rendered in a P.O.W. camp in Vietnam. It's being rendered right now in the U.S. Senate.

In the first place, McCain seems to be the only member of Congress who insists on holding hearings and working toward compromise before passing major legislation. This would seem to be the very elemental prerequisite of good government — like a doctor seeking a diagnosis before performing surgery — but McCain appears to be the only member, or at least the only Republican, willing to risk unpopularity to insist upon a basic respect for our sacred institutions.

Second, McCain is one of very few Republicans willing to stand up for the American story. Human beings can be rallied around one of three things: religion, tribe or ideals.

Donald Trump and the campus multiculturalists want to organize people by ethnic tribe, which has always been the menacing temptation throughout our history. But McCain seeks to preserve our traditional rallying point — our ideals. My colleague Bret Stephens has already quoted from McCain's speech on Monday at the National Constitution Center. I'd encourage you to read the whole thing because this should be the rallying cry around which the nation rediscovers its soul.

Third and most important, McCain still believes that paideia is essential for democracy. Paideia is the process by which we educate one another for citizenship. Paideia is based on the idea that a healthy democracy requires a certain sort of honorable citizen — that if we're not willing to tell one another the truth, devote our lives to common purposes or defer to a shared moral order, then we'll succumb to the shallowness of a purely commercial civilization, we'll be torn asunder by the centrifugal forces of extreme individualism, we'll rip one another to shreds in the naked struggle for power.

As the brilliant Spanish philosopher Javier Gomá Lanzón reminds us, most moral education happens by power of example. We publish the book of our lives every day through our actions, and through our conduct we teach one another what is worthy of admiration and what is worthy of disdain.

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Public figures are the primary teachers in this mutual education. Our leaders have outsize influence in either weaving the moral order by their good example or ripping it to shreds by their bad example.

McCain's career has had its low moments, as all of ours do — a banking scandal, Sarah Palin — but he exemplifies a practical standard of excellence to an extraordinary degree: enduring in Vietnam, seeking compromise legislation on everything from immigration reform to campaign spending, condemning torture after 9/11.

Moreover, I don't think there's another politician now living who devotes so much of his speeches to little biographies of his own exemplars, people like James Stockdale, Bud Day, Morris Udall and Master Sgt. Roy Benavidez. He has turned his own

heroes into educational resources for his country, and used them to evangelize our national ideals.

These sorts of testimonies help weave a shared moral order, which is necessary to unite, guide and motivate a diverse country.

That is an essential bulwark in the age of Trump. That is what needs rebuilding. Books will someday be written on how Trump, this wounded and twisted man, became morally acceptable to tens of millions of Americans. But it must have something to do with the way over the past decades we have divorced private and public morality, as if private narcissism would have no effect on public conduct.

It must have something to do with the great tide of moral libertarianism from Herbert Marcuse on down. This tide taught that progress meant emancipating the individual from shared moral orders. It taught transgression was always delightful and that morality was individual and optional.

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The acceptability of Trump must also have something to do with millions of religious voters being willing to abandon the practical wisdom of their faiths — that what exists inside a person is more important than what is external, that no bad tree yields good fruit, that you should never trade spiritual humility for worldly ferocity because in humility there is strength and in pride there is self-destruction.

We've reached a point in which the tasks of paideia have been abandoned and neglected. "One could say," Gomá writes in his book "Public Exemplarity," "that we are looking for the ideal of a virtuous republic composed of citizens relieved of the burden of citizenship."

It's not working out. Gomá continues, "In a time of freedom such as ours marked by subjectivism and vulgarity, a tolerance not tempered by virtue will lead inevitably toward barbarism."

Barbarism and vulgarity we have in profusion. Through his daily utterances, Trump is influencing the nation in powerful ways, but none would call it paideia. Few would say he is spreading a contagion that we'd like our children to catch.

The moral fabric of society is invisible but essential. Some use their public position to dissolve it so they can have an open space for their selfishness. McCain is one of the strongest reweavers we have, and one of our best and most stubborn teachers.

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A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 19, 2017, on Page A25 of the New York edition with the headline: The Essential John McCain

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