

John McCain's Imperial Complex

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Obituaries are not the best places to identify faults unless they assume the form of a hatchet job. The opposite is more often the case: worshipful and respectful to the point of being cloying. As the tears dry, and the sobs of reflection pass, the figure transmogrifies. For a politician, aspects of the hero are sketched out, crumples and creases ironed. In the case of the late Senator John McCain, his role as sober, stable legislator were underscored in a world of Trumpland's narcissistic chaos. His five-year stint a prisoner of war in that brutal school of re-education "Hanoi Hilton" constituted an important part of resume building in politics, and it was not forgotten.

A drier eye would be more circumspect in looking at the senator from Arizona. Christopher Hitchens did not have much time for a person he regarded as a poor politician who never quite got over an inner gunpowder tendency to blow.

"He combines the body of an ox with the brains of a gnat," he tartly observed in [Slate](#) in a year the senator was contesting the presidency against Barack Obama. "Indeed, if his brains were made of gunpowder and were to accidentally explode, the resulting bang would not even be enough to rearrange his hair."

For Hitchens on McCain, the question was whether rage was of the generous sort, or an ungovernable one leading to instability.

The case of McCain the erratic did not convince that other late scion of neoconservative enthusiasm, Charles Krauthammer, holding fort at the [Washington Post](#) in claiming that it was merely a "cheap Obama talking point. The 40-year record testifies to McCain the stalwart." What held sway for Krauthammer against Obama was McCain's insistence that the global financial crisis had softened US resolve; the need to be fearful of the outside world was ever present. He proceeded to outline a laundry list of terrors current and imminent, all necessary mental baggage for the neoconservative zealot:

"We have a generations-long struggle with Islamic jihadism. An apocalyptic soon-to-be-nuclear Iran. A nuclear-armed Pakistan in danger of fragmentation. A rising Russia pushing the limits of revanchism. Plus to sure-to-come Falklands-like surprise popping out of nowhere."

If you deal in the economy of fear, McCain was your man.

This harnessing of insecurity was something that played well with an individual who had

transformed from hardened realist to messianic neoconservative, a process that was complete by 1999. That conversion saw a notable voice in Congress enlisted in the service of the American imperium, one far from cautious about the sorrows of imperial overstretch. Even after the catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003, he would still stump for the neoconservative cause, issuing a [manifesto](#) of such themes for presidential candidate Mitt Romney in 2012:

“We are now engaged in a great debate over whether America’s core challenge is how to manage our own decline as a great power – or how to renew our capacity to carry on our proud tradition of world leadership. Ultimately, this is what’s at stake in this election, and the stakes could not be higher.”

It is precisely such a vision that landed US marines in Vietnam, in total ignorance of the nature of polycentric communism, and old Mesopotamia, in total obliviousness to the complex dynamic of Middle Eastern politics. Both constituted failed experiments of a misguided, imperial cast of mind. The latter case supplied an object lesson in the tormentedly flawed policy of regime change, a point McCain refused to accept. As Jacob Heilbrunn would [observe](#) in *The National Interest*,

“McCain’s vision of American power and influence around the globe is so open-ended that it constitutes an invitation for hegemony, something that China is bound to reject.”

Such a vision is, by nature, intolerant of rivals, and naturally inflating of threats. Foes must be found; their potency must be exaggerated. It persuaded McCain that North Korean nuclear tests, conducted in 2006, [warranted](#) the acquisition of a missile defence shield both futile and costly.

McCain’s other chequered side sported a certain insensitivity to race, a point that surfaced with a murmur in 2008. Eight years prior, while on a bruising campaign trail for the White House that saw him pitted against the Bush dynasts, he made a crass [remark](#) reflecting on his time as a prisoner of war.

“I hate the gooks,” he shot at reporters aboard his campaign bus. “I will hate them as long as I live.”

Executive director of the San Francisco-based Chinese for Affirmative Action was [plainspoken](#) in her disgust:

“For someone running for president not to recognize the power of words is a problem.”

McCain’s response was to issue a modest qualifier:

“I was referring to my prison guards and will continue to refer to them in language that might offend some people because of the beating and torture of my friends.”

Tributes to McCain have attempted to isolate the good and noble from the rot and the core. Contrast McCain the principled man with the GOP, an unprincipled entity pockmarked by corruption. Eugene Robinson of the *Post* is an exponent of this exercise.

“President Trump’s GOP,” [he reflected](#), “could not care less about the ideals McCain stood for, such as honour, service and community. The party is shamefully moulded in Trump’s image now, with its enormous corruption, monumental selfishness and grasping little hands.”

Sterling, graphic stuff, made less plausible by its errors: Trump’s GOP, the same entity so incredulous at his rise? The same entity so utterly opposed to him in favour of family nepotism?

For all his deeply critical faults, Trump lacks an ideological worldview that idolises the neoconservative creed. His interventions leave aside the messianic urge to meddle in the name of a higher good – hardly surprising for one immune to such notions. McCain, in razor sharp contrast, remained, to the last, the spokesman of US valour and its legions, even to the detriment of his own country and its cruel predations.

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