

AS DELIVERED

EULOGY FOR SENATOR JOHN McCAIN

By Henry A. Kissinger

September 1, 2018

Our country has had the good fortune that, at times of national trial, a few great personalities have emerged to remind us of our essential unity and inspire us to fulfil our sustaining values. John McCain was one of those gifts of destiny.

I met John for the first time in April 1973, at a White House reception for prisoners returned from captivity in Vietnam. He had been much on my mind during the negotiations to end the Vietnam War, partly because his father, then Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Command, when briefing the President answered references to his son by saying only, "I pray for him." In the McCain family, national service was its own reward that did not allow for special treatment.

I thought of that when his Vietnamese captors, during the final phase of negotiations, offered to release John so that he could return with me on the official plane that had brought me to Hanoi. Against all my instincts, I thanked them for their offer but refused it. I wondered what John would say when we finally met. His greeting was both self-effacing and moving: "Thank you for saving my honor," said John McCain. He did not tell me then, or ever, that he had had an opportunity to be freed years earlier but had refused—a decision for which he had to endure additional periods of isolation and hardship. Nor did he ever speak of his captivity again during our near-half-century of close friendship.

John's focus was on creating a better future. As a senator, he supported the restoration of relations with Vietnam, helped bring it about on a bipartisan basis in the Clinton administration, and became one of the advocates of reconciliation with the erstwhile enemy.

Honor was John's lodestar. It is an intangible faculty. It is not, like law, obligatory. It has no written code. It reflects an inward compulsion free of self-interest. It fulfils a cause, not a personal ambition. It represents what a society lives for beyond the necessities of the moment. Law makes life possible. Honor ennobles it. For John, it was a way of life.

John returned to an America divided over its presidency, divided over the war and, amidst all the turmoil and civic unrest, divided over the best

way to protect our country, and over whether it should be respected for its power or its ideals.

John came back from the war and declared this a false choice—America owed it to itself to embrace both strength and ideals. In decades of Congressional service, ultimately as Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, John was an indefatigable exponent of an America strong enough to vindicate its purpose.

But John believed also in a compassionate America guided by core principles for which American foreign policy must always stand. “‘With liberty and justice for all’ is not an empty sentiment;” he argued in 1999, “it is the foundation of our national consciousness.”

To John, American verities had universal applicability: “I do not believe,” he said, “that there is an Arab exception any more than there was a Black African exception, an Asian or a Latin exception.” Therefore, he warned against the temptation of withdrawal from the world: “We will not thrive in a world where our leadership and ideals are absent. We wouldn’t deserve it.”

In this manner, John McCain’s name became synonymous with an America that reached out to oblige the powerful to be lawful and give hope to the oppressed. John’s were not academic maxims. He was an engaged warrior on the front lines of all these battles for decency with ebullience, with courage and humility to the limit of the feasible and sometimes, miraculously, even beyond it.

John was all about hope. In a commencement speech at Ohio Wesleyan University, John summed up the essence of his engagement of a lifetime: “No one of character leaves behind a wasted life...Like most people my age, I feel a longing for what is lost and cannot be restored. But if the happy pursuits and casual beauty of youth prove ephemeral, something better can endure, and endure until our last moment on earth. And that is the honor we earn and the love we give if at a moment in our lives we sacrifice for something greater than self-interest.”

Heroes inspire us by the matter-of-factness of their sacrifice and the elevation of their vision. The world will be lonelier without John McCain, his ebullience, his faith in America, and his instinctive sense of moral duty. None of us will ever forget how, even in his parting, John has bestowed on us a much-needed moment of unity and renewed faith in the possibilities of America. Henceforth the country’s honor is ours to sustain.