

McCain's Friends and Family Did Him No Honor

by Conrad Black



De mortuis nil nisi bonum. No one could fail to be moved by the sight at his funeral Saturday of Senator McCain's centenarian mother and his loyal wife accompanied by his sons in uniform and other family members. No one has any standing to take issue with the secretary of defense, the universally respected and unanimously confirmed General James Mattis, in his description of the late senator as the repository of the highest human qualities.

But what happened at the National Cathedral on Saturday was in effect two funerals. Navy veteran and prisoner of war John McCain was given suitable honors in the stately and well-attended service. A second service was added into it by the enemies of the president, which detracted from the first.

Henry Kissinger, who by his eloquence and experience must be the world's greatest eulogist since [Bossuet](#), confined himself

to Senator McCain's bravery as a naval aviator and prisoner of war, and scion of a family of admirals. His remarks were entirely appropriate. Equally unexceptionable were the recollections of his closest senatorial friends, Lindsay Graham and Joseph Lieberman. President George W. Bush's remarks were entirely passable.

But the recourse by President Obama and Senator McCain's daughter to clearly hostile references to the incumbent president (who had facilitated the protracted funeral week with official favors) were in appalling taste. There was what amounted to an attempted hijack of the funeral of an authentic war hero and prominent senator, to convert it into an expression of anger and of contempt for the absent president. This campaign was torqued up all week by the Trump-hating media, who then gave maximum play to the gratuitous shots of Obama and Meghan McCain.

Donald Trump uttered the most unfortunate of all his acidulous criticisms of opponents when he said in 2015 that Senator McCain was mainly a hero because of his performance as a prisoner. This may have been largely true but was extremely ungracious. Anyone who was in combat over the territory of a well-armed enemy country is a brave person.

If the statement of then-candidate Trump is to be evaluated fairly it should be remembered that McCain had accused him of mobilizing "the crazies" in a packed-out campaign appearance he made in the senator's home state. There is plenty of room to disagree with McCain's attitude toward illegal immigration (and a great many other positions he held), but it was provocative for him to have described Trump supporters in his own state in the terms he did.

There was a long history of antipathy between those men going back to Trump's disparagement of all the candidates in the 2000 campaign when he considered running as a third-party candidate. More recently, McCain was a champion of the false

and defamatory Trump-Russian collusion theory and helped propagate it after being misled at a 2016 security conference in Halifax, Canada.

Trump was precisely the sort of person McCain did not like. He did not serve in the armed forces, but he did make a great deal of money, and he was elected president of the United States—two events absent in McCain's curriculum vitae, whose political career was largely financed by his wife and her family. He was one of the most inept candidates for president since George McGovern.

The senator had every right to dislike the president and the president had an equal right to dislike the senator. Even those most admiring of McCain have acknowledged that he had a bad temper and at times was a nasty man. That quality was certainly in evidence in his dramatic casting of a decisive vote against the repeal of Obamacare, a policy goal he had pledged to support.

The spectacle of the Obamas, Bushes, Clintons, Cheneys, Al Gore and in earlier proceedings Joe Biden, prominent among the mourners, brought to mind everything that President Trump has run successfully against. Vice President Pence spoke with admirable diplomacy to bridge political differences at the Capitol on Friday. Apart from Mattis, the administration was also represented at the funeral by the White House chief of staff, General John Kelly, and by the president's elder daughter and son-in-law.

Throughout the week, the president and his family and administration were the soul of discretion and respect, ignoring the media repurposing of the obsequies as a Trump-bashing orgy. Obama's comments reminded us of why the American public has substantially rejected the 20 years of public policy personified by the chief official mourners.

It is not clear to an outsider to what extent McCain intended

his funeral to be a firing range for the president's enemies. State funerals are not normally or properly transformed into partisan occasions and the National Cathedral is not an appropriate setting for one. Those who made it so, including the deceased (if he was one of them), did no honor to John McCain or themselves. On this occasion, the performance of President Trump and his intimates was exemplary.

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