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## A Tribute to John McCain

BY [NICHOLAS ROMANOW](#) on [AUGUST 27, 2018](#) • [\(1\)](#)

Fate, as we all know, is a fickle thing. It demonstrated this as Senator John McCain, a veteran and politician whose character and wisdom have inspired Americans since the 1960s, fought his last good fight against brain cancer on Saturday. The announcements of his passing occurred almost exactly as I listened to the last few minutes of the audiobook of his memoir, *The Restless Wave*. The epilogue, narrated by McCain himself, was an emotionally exhausting piece of poetry that evoked tears as well as intense reflection on what makes a life well-lived. As students return to campus to embark on another chapter of our lives, the courage, compassion, and restlessness of the late hero illuminates a path to face our own fate as future leaders of our society.

John McCain will be remembered as an unfading figure of modern American history, and his life will long be heralded as nothing less than extraordinary. Though, in his own words, McCain remarkably stresses how ordinary he is.

A man born into a long line of naval officers, McCain was undeniably imbued with the values of public service and self-sacrifice. The ordeal of his captivity in Hanoi, Vietnam arguably defined the rest of his life, yet McCain would insist on being more than a prisoner of war. The specter of the Vietnam War would not haunt McCain as much as it would embolden his endeavors to fight for justice and liberty worldwide.

On multiple occasions, the former detainee would take a stand for others sharing the same experience, whether they were like-minded advocates of freedom persecuted by autocracies or enemy combatants held by the United States. Nor would McCain's suffering foster a bitter heart: McCain would later contribute to the normalization of relations between the U.S. and his former captors.

Many of today's college students might struggle to relate to the life and struggles of McCain. Our generation is somewhat far removed from the Cold War's geopolitical climate and the harsh realities of war and conscription. Yet, nearly all college students today will remember McCain from his prominence as the GOP nominee in the 2008 presidential election. What we — and others — may have missed is the continuation of unfettered courage by the aptly-nicknamed "Maverick."

With the hindsight of today's political climate, McCain's memorable [defense](#) of Barack Obama at a town hall event is a hallmark of such courage. The Maverick looked the darker passions of America directly in the eye and did not blink. We will never know how different that election night would be if McCain had chosen instead to stoke the animosity of the post-9/11 era and unleash the tribal instincts we grapple with today.

McCain's memoir might easily be mistaken for an adventure novel. His experiences and anecdotes — some humorous, some grave, but all instructive — capture a self-described restlessness fueled by a passion for service. In an era where the highest praise is given to the lonesome entrepreneur, figures like McCain seem found in our history lessons but not in our hearts. We are constantly shown stories of success and gain, but rarely of humility and sacrifice. The American student seeks the path to the top, but



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not always the path to a life well-lived. McCain would argue a life well-lived is one consisting of great fights for higher causes, and he was undoubtedly a warrior for life.

McCain fought many fights, and he fought them all courageously. He fought because he believed in the equal dignity of all. He fought because he believed we are more alike than we are different. He fought because he believed that true human nature is love and compassion, not greed and antipathy.

Even as McCain fought his last and final battle against cancer, he did not stop fighting for the country as he took up interwoven battles against the dysfunction of government and the division of the public in his final words on the floor of the Senate. McCain fought and led by example. His courage knew no bounds. In his memory, we must carry on these battles with the same unrelenting courage.

McCain's legacy is not one of a flawless hero. Rather, McCain's everlasting importance lies in his imperfections and his grace in defeat and setbacks. Whether it was his presidential campaigns or his role in the wars in Iraq or Vietnam, McCain is not a stock character in the lore of American triumphalism.

Our memory of him shows us that falling short of our ideals does not mean that we lack them. Fighting for causes which seem lost is still something good and true and righteous.

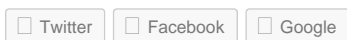
He demonstrated the best in human nature precisely because he was *not* perfect. Rather, McCain realized the imperfections of himself and the world around him, and he spent his lifetime committed to improving both.

A return to another semester marks a new start and a rush of anxiety and uncertainty. McCain would comfort us all by imploring students to embrace their restlessness, respect one another, and live boldly. For students today, it is hard to imagine coming of age at a more turbulent time. Whether we blame digital technology or chaotic politics, we future leaders are inheriting an uncertain world. However, there is no greater privilege than to assume the mantle of leadership left to us by the courageous, restless, and irreplaceable John McCain.

Rest in Peace to the Restless Wave.

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