

Politico

The Last Maverick

Why we won't see the likes of John McCain again.

By **BRYAN BENDER**

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SCOTTSDALE, Arizona — The death of John McCain marks the end of a storied political career — and the final chapter in the journey of a fiercely independent giant of national politics, a man admired on both sides of the aisle for his integrity, heroism in war and basic human decency.

But it also means the end of a century-long streak for Arizona, which has given rise to some the most influential figures ever to grace the corridors of power in Washington.

The final state to be admitted to the union in the continental U.S. — and for much of its history one of the smallest in population — Arizona has boasted a long roster of officeholders hailing from both major parties who made a lasting impact on the conservative movement and the development of the West, and on several occasions came, like McCain, within grasp of the White House.

That tradition is now being mourned here along with Arizona's senior senator, who succumbed to brain cancer on Saturday.

“Arizona has always had an outsize influence,” said former Republican Rep. John Shadegg, who served in the House from 1995 to 2011. “We had a greater impact than a small, Western state would be expected to. There is nobody currently on the horizon who will get that stature back.”

Arizona has produced a roster of national leaders whose legacies cast a shadow far beyond the Grand Canyon State.

There is, of course, the late Barry Goldwater, the firebrand Republican nominee for president in 1964 who paved the way for Ronald Reagan and whose own maverick streak guided McCain, who replaced him in the U.S. Senate in 1987. After Gerald Ford became vice president in 1973, Arizona Rep. John

Rhodes served as minority leader of the House, where he championed a fiercely conservative Republican agenda. And McCain's Senate colleague Jeff Flake, who is retiring, has likewise carved his own path, denouncing President Donald Trump with a ferocity few other Republicans have dared to match.

On the Democratic side there were the Udall brothers — Mo, a candidate for president in 1976, and his brother Stewart, who served as President John F. Kennedy's secretary of the interior. And others recalled Ernest McFarland, who served as the Senate majority leader before Lyndon Johnson.

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But perhaps most influential was Democrat Carl Hayden, the president pro tempore of the Senate and second-longest serving member of Congress. Kennedy once remarked of Hayden, who was born in what was then the Arizona Territory: "Every federal program which has contributed to the development of the West — irrigation, power, reclamation — bears his mark, and the great federal highway program which binds this country, together, which permits this State to be competitive east and west, north and south, this in large measure is his creation."

McCain emerged on the national scene not simply because of his biography — the son and grandson of admirals, Vietnam prisoner of war for five and a half years. It was also because of his repeated attempts to cross the aisle in an era when bipartisanship is far less common, even in the Senate — whether on campaign finance reform, immigration laws, or to cast the decisive "no" vote last year in the GOP's efforts to kill the Affordable Care Act.

That maverick streak earned him the enmity of many national Republicans — including Trump, who infamously told an Iowa crowd that he preferred "people who weren't captured" and repeatedly trashed the Arizona senator for voting against the repeal of Obamacare.

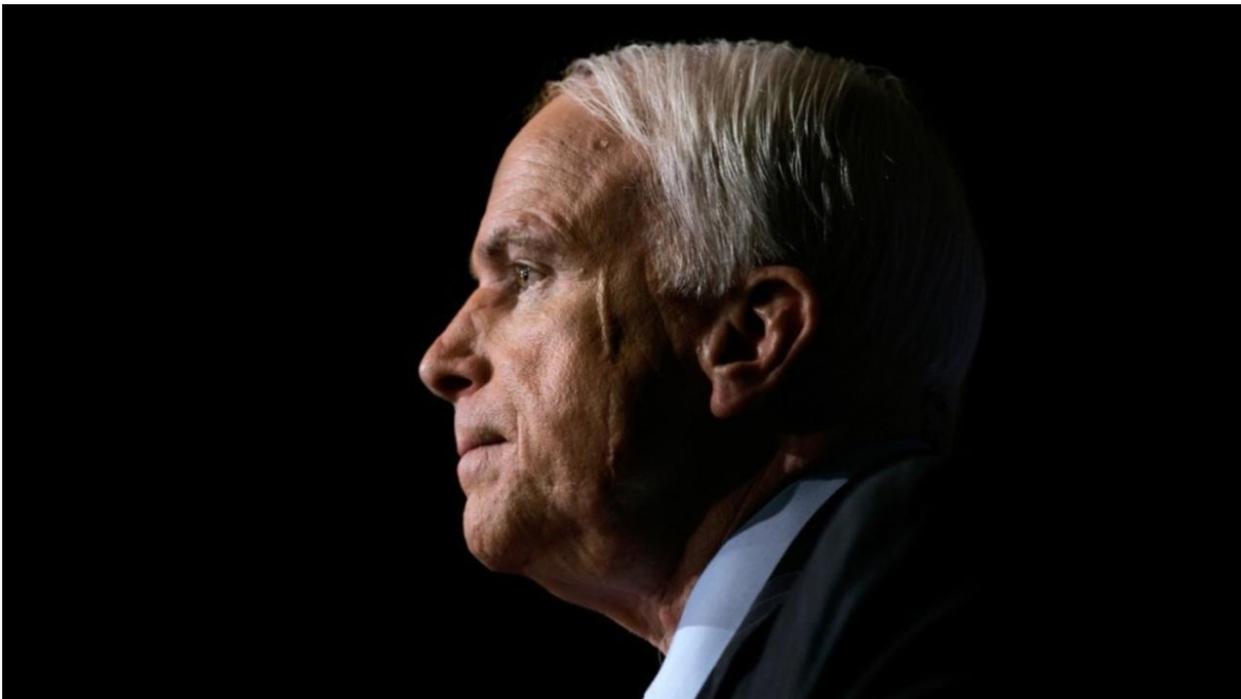
McCain's star has faded, too, among some hard-core elements of the Republican coalition in Arizona in recent years; indeed, one of the Republicans vying to replace Flake, Kelli

Ward, [lambasted him](#) on the stump for his lack of ideological purity just hours before he died on Saturday.

And last week, Rep. Martha McSally — a protégé of McCain's who is seeking Trump's endorsement in the primary against Ward and former Maricopa County Sheriff and Trump favorite Joe Arpaio — was criticized for standing by the president's side when he signed the annual defense bill named in honor of McCain but never mentioning McCain in nearly an hour of remarks.

But statewide, where a full third of registered voters are members of neither the Democratic nor Republican parties, McCain secured six terms in the Senate and always won reelection easily — a sign that his clashes with GOP leaders in Washington and even some in Arizona didn't cripple him at the polls.

Indeed, the political independence that McCain made his own — beginning when he was first elected to Congress in 1982, through two presidential campaigns, and more recently as one of Trump's leading GOP detractors — remains a source of immense pride.



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“There is a perception of his star being tarnished because there is some squeaky wheels asking for grease,” said Gibson McKay, a former McCain staffer who is now Republican campaign consultant in Phoenix. “He didn’t serve Joe Arpaio, he didn’t serve Kelli Ward, he didn’t serve the Republican Party. He served the people.”

“John always stayed the same,” he added. “Sometimes that pissed off people who are in the party power structure. But regardless of what the GOP pundits and those of the chattering class believe — or believe they believe — John McCain always won elections in Arizona overwhelmingly.”

Part of that is credited to the national — even international — stature and influence that McCain bestowed on Arizona.

Before, “you’d go around the world, you’d say, ‘Arizona,’ and they’d say ‘Barry Goldwater,’” recalled Shaddeg, whose father Stephen was a longtime campaign aide to Goldwater and whose son Stephen is steering McSally’s Senate bid. “Then it switched.

You'd go to some country and say 'Arizona,' and they'd say 'John McCain'."

McCain was an enormously influential senator with an instant ability to grab headlines. He leaves behind powerful legacies in foreign policy, national security, campaign finance and countless other issues.

But with his departure, there's a worry here that Arizona's ability to shape national politics may be fading.

"It is a different day," said Doug Cole, a former McCain staffer who is also now a Republican consultant in Phoenix. "We have enjoyed over our 105-year-history an extraordinary amount of political power in Washington. The political leaders we have sent to Washington have been national figures. On McCain's passing we lose that — that streak that has existed from the beginning."