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John McCain ‘Suffered Fools Poorly,’ and Arizonans Admired Him For It



Andrea Stone and her sons Nicholas, 5, and William, 3, placed hand-drawn memorials outside the Phoenix mortuary holding Senator John McCain's body. Credit: Caitlin O'Hara for The New York Times

By Simon Romero

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PHOENIX — As the motorcade carrying [the body of Senator John S. McCain](#) made its way into Phoenix this weekend, Arizonans lined up on the side of roads, some with hands over their hearts, others saluting, as if somberly acknowledging that a political era was coming to an end.

“It’s going to be decades in Arizona before we see another political figure with the international stature of John McCain,” said Douglas Cole, a fourth-generation Arizonan and political consultant who once worked as a staffer for Mr. McCain.

Without hiding the fact that he was an outsider in this part of the West, Mr. McCain nevertheless came to symbolize a tradition in Arizona in which a select group of elected officials wielded outside influence in the state and beyond. After moving here in the early 1980s, he emerged as a towering figure in a state known for other monumental political figures, such as [Carl Hayden](#), a Democrat who served in Congress from 1912 to 1968; and Barry M. Goldwater, the [pioneer of the modern conservative movement](#) who was the Republican nominee for president in 1964.



Flowers near a statue at the Enduring Freedom Memorial in front of the State Capitol. Credit Caitlin O'Hara for The New York Times

Rising into the company of such giants in Arizona — arguably one of Mr. McCain's defining legacies for many constituents in the state he represented — didn't come easy for the senator. But his unvarnished explanation of how he ended up fighting for a place in the conservative bastion's congressional delegation suited some in Arizona just fine.

Mr. McCain had just retired from the Navy, moved to Arizona and entered the political arena in 1982 in a run for a seat in the House of Representatives. Trailing Republican rivals in the polls and growing weary of critics calling him a carpetbagger, he snapped back during a forum with other candidates.

“Listen, pal, I spent 22 years in the Navy,” Mr. McCain, who was born in the Panama Canal Zone and attended some 20 different schools growing up in a military family, [said at the time](#).



Petty Officer Third Class Paloma Rivera, right, relieved Sgt. Richard Means of honor guard duty outside the mortuary. Mr. McCain was a Navy veteran who was a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Credit Caitlin O'Hara for The New York Times

“We in the military service tend to move a lot,” he continued. “We have to live in all parts of the country, all parts of the world. I wish I could have had the luxury, like you, of growing up and living and spending my entire life in a nice place like the First District of Arizona, but I was doing other things. As a matter of fact, when I think about it now, the place I lived longest in my life was Hanoi.”

Going on to prevail in that race, Mr. McCain never lost another election for Congress in Arizona. He and his wife, Cindy, the heiress to an Arizona beer distribution fortune, [owned condos](#) in Arlington, Va., and La Jolla, Calif., but the place where Mr. McCain may ultimately have felt most at home was in Cornville, Ariz., a town of 3,300 people north of Phoenix.

The McCains bought a ranch in Cornville called Hidden Valley, at the end of a bumpy dirt road, and built guest quarters on the property. Mr. McCain became known for grilling burgers for visitors or frequenting local haunts in town, where his neighbors grew accustomed to seeing him without a security detail.

Memorials outside Mr. McCain's former office. Credit Caitlin O'Hara for The New York Times



“John would come in wearing a T-shirt that said ‘Gone Fishing’ on it, sit at the bar and order a cocktail,” said Mario Aguilar-Aello, the co-owner of Up the Creek, a bistro and wine bar in Cornville. He said one of the senator’s favorite drinks was sambuca, the Italian anise-flavored liqueur; Mr. McCain would often order ribs or étouffée, the Cajun dish served with shellfish over rice.

“Every once in a while an individual would come up to him with a pointed question, but he’d just smile and say, ‘I’d love to tell you what I think on that, but Mario doesn’t allow politics at the bar,’” said Mr. Aguilar-Aello. “This was where he came to relax, to be a regular person, and people in the town respected that.”

Mr. Cole, the former staffer for Mr. McCain, said that the state proved to be the right fit for a politician prepared to go out on a limb and work with, or sometimes energetically oppose, leaders in both parties.

Video

8:36 John McCain: The Making of a Maverick

A look at the formative times and turmoil that shaped a historic American figure, with Carl Hulse, The Times's chief Washington correspondent. CreditCreditStephen Crowley/The New York Times

“Arizona has always had a deep independent streak,” said Mr. Cole. The political landscape in the state is in flux now, with Mr. McCain’s passing and a bruising Republican primary set for Tuesday to replace Senator Jeff Flake, the Republican who announced that he would not seek another term after clashing with President Trump.

Offering a glimpse of the scars that some of Mr. McCain’s political battles produced in Arizona, some of the remembrances of him here were possibly as multilayered and complex as Mr. McCain himself. In [an essay for The Phoenix New Times](#), a weekly newspaper, the journalist Amy Silverman described the callousness with which Mr. McCain would sometimes treat rivals, especially Democrats who are women.

“McCain could be a very colorful character, very real, he’d let it all hang out,” said Ms. Silverman, arguing that Mr. McCain never completely overcame his transplant status. She questioned the senator’s priorities in seeking to avoid, possibly to Arizona’s detriment, the pork-barrel spending projects that politicians elsewhere often prioritize, to the benefit of their constituents.

“For those of us here in Arizona, as McCain spent more and more time burnishing his reputation with the national media, well, maybe familiarity breeds contempt,” Ms. Silverman said, contending that Mr. McCain be remembered as “America’s senator, not Arizona’s.”

Mr. McCain might have argued otherwise, posting photos on social media, even as he dealt with cancer treatment, of hiking with his family in the hills around Cornville. Arizona, which catapulted him onto the national stage, served as his refuge as he expressed regret over the intensifying [partisanship in United States politics](#).

“He suffered fools poorly, and that’s something people in Arizona admired him for,” said Gibson McKay, a former aide to Mr. McCain, pointing to the honor guard of veterans standing watch at the mortuary here in Phoenix, guarding Mr. McCain's remains. “That straightforwardness, coupled with the tenacity with which he fought for his beliefs, earned him admiration. With John, you got what you saw.”

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