

Bill Kaplan: McCain, lessons for today

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The death of Arizona GOP Senator John McCain on Saturday reminds the nation of how low American politics has fallen. Vietnam War hero McCain survived over five harrowing years as a POW. He went on to a distinguished thirty-five year career in Congress: addressing climate change, supporting immigration reform, opposing torture and leading on campaign finance reform, with Wisconsin Democratic Senator Russ Feingold. In 2010, after Feingold lost reelection, McCain on the Senate floor said: "The Senate will be a much poorer place without Russ Feingold in it Feingold every day and in every way had the courage of his convictions. I think he is one of the most admirable people I have ever met in my entire life." There were tears in McCain's eyes as he spoke.

On Sunday, the New York Times posted an eloquent heartfelt tribute to McCain by Feingold: "John would have been a very good president. His fundamental respect for diverging viewpoints, his willingness to befriend people from different parties and philosophies, his intense desire not for political dominance but to get things done, and yes, his sense of humor, would have served our divided nation and fraught world well." Feingold, like McCain, always a hero. The antithesis of the Trump administration.

Last Tuesday, "truth overran tweets, when facts overwhelmed bald assertions" (Dan Balz, Washington Post). Special Counsel Robert Mueller, a Republican and Vietnam War hero like McCain, won a conviction of Trump campaign Chair Paul Manafort on tax and bank-fraud charges. Previously, Mueller secured guilty pleas from Trump Deputy campaign Chair Rick Gates for conspiracy and lying to the FBI, disgraced Trump National Security Adviser Michael Flynn for lying to the FBI and three other individuals. Moreover, Mueller has also indicted twenty-six Russians for interfering in the 2016 presidential election. Separately, on Tuesday, Trump's former attorney and fixer, Michael Cohen, pleaded guilty to tax evasion and campaign finance violations in a Manhattan federal court (referred to the U.S. Attorney's office there

by Mueller).

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Harvard Law School constitutional scholar Laurence Tribe told Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin: “Whether or not called an unindicted co-conspirator, that’s what the sitting president (Trump) is That’s the import of two of Michael Cohen’s guilty pleas on charges of making knowingly illegal campaign contributions at Trump’s behest in the form of hush money to keep his sex scandals quiet as the (2016) election date approached.” Tribe added that the conviction of Manafort showed “that this criminal administration is coming unglued.”

When the press asked House Speaker Paul Ryan for his reaction, Ryan’s spokesperson vapidly said: “We will need more information than is currently available at this point.” Similarly, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson “deflected” questions, ducking the limelight for once. However, Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin nailed it down: “Today’s guilty plea and verdict make it clear that the Mueller investigation must proceed unobstructed. The American people need to know the truth.” McCain would have agreed, having earlier said the Trump scandals had reached “Watergate size and scale”.

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.