

John McCain Was a Committed Leader. He Was Also Really Fun. By Russ Feingold (English 1 Honors)

Required Annotations		Student-Created Annotations		Summary / Questions / Reflection	
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Being with John McCain, who died Saturday afternoon, could be a lot of work but was almost always fun. There were many often heroic chapters in this exciting man's life to which others can better speak. But he and I spent well over a decade working closely together across the aisle as legislators: all over this country when it came to campaign finance reform, and around the world when it came to foreign policy.

When we traveled from Little Rock to Annapolis to San Francisco and beyond to hold "townhall meetings" in the home districts of **recalcitrant** senators and congressmen, John delighted in introducing me to the crowds saying: "People in Wisconsin think Senator Feingold's first name is McCain," reflecting the popular name of our campaign finance reform bill and also how long it was taking to pass it. In a place like New Orleans, after a long day of meetings and rallies and long after I had gone to bed, John was still playing the tables at Harrah's though he was 16 years my senior.

When I would see John on the Senate floor way over on the "other" — Republican — side, he would **invariably** come running over to me and say something like, "C'mon boy, we have to get one more Democrat co-sponsor." Or, "We're going to New York next week for a news conference at Teddy Roosevelt's birthplace." The conversations were brief, to the point and about getting the job done: He was a determined man, always in motion. All of us, including his terrific staff led by Mark Salter, were always trying to keep up with him, to which John would typically say, "March or die. March or die."

Of course we did not always see eye-to-eye, even on our own bill. There was one period when John and I knew we had to scale back our more ambitious campaign-finance legislation to attract support. We had a tense and difficult conversation about what should be cut, and it didn't end well. I spent the evening afterward wondering whether we might go separate ways, even though, despite our **ideological** differences, we had reached the same conclusion: that the system by which members of Congress were being elected was corrupt.

By this time, John and I were no longer just a political odd couple. We had become dear friends. When I approached John on the Senate floor the next morning to agree to much of his version of a scaled-back McCain-Feingold bill, I was struck and humbled by the relief on his face. We laughed when he hugged me and patted me on the back repeatedly. John also agreed to some of my requests in that conversation, conveying a keen understanding of why I was fighting hard for certain **provisions**.

One time, during a long, lonely debate before we had nearly enough votes, we sat together on the Senate floor and commented about how our colleagues in each of our parties weren't speaking to us much anymore. I said, "Yeah, and now you're going to become president and leave me here alone." John replied, "No, no. You'll be in the

cabinet.” He paused and then, with a grin, said, “But just not as secretary of defense.”

And, indeed, while we often agreed on domestic reform issues, we had almost **diametrically** opposed views on defense, especially on certain military interventions, Iraq in particular. But this did not stop John from inviting me as one of two Democrats on a nine-person Congressional delegation trip to Iraq in 2006, when things were not going at all well there. On the plane trip over, he had us all convene for a briefing. John spoke at length about the approach of Col. H.R. McMaster, who would later become a three-star general and President Trump’s national security adviser, to insurgencies. At the appropriate time, I **interjected** my views about the likely futility of such an approach, to which a Republican governor on the trip said: “Why did you bring this guy along?” Not missing a beat, John responded: “I bring Russ along because he is consistent — consistently wrong.” The fact is, as passionate as John was about his positions, he truly valued hearing all sides and was a good listener.

Yet, it was John’s interaction in Baghdad’s Green Zone in 2006 with David Petraeus, then a lieutenant general, that most displayed his integrity and commitment to getting things right. John’s questions to the decorated general were pointed and tough and made clear his first duty was to the American men and women serving there, not to his own ego or belief in the mission. He sharply challenged the general’s claims about the success that had been achieved in training Iraqi troops. He did this in front of strong opponents of the war knowing it could be used as **fodder** against the intervention in which he believed. He wanted to know the facts wherever they led.

That encounter and so many others made me feel that 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.

John McCain, to paraphrase Teddy Roosevelt, had the heart to demand joy in life. And demand it he did, with his wife, Cindy, whose own work, particularly in Africa, remains a powerful example of caring and commitment. Like so many others, I will greatly miss my friend. We will all be poorer without his leadership. He was a modern-day rough rider, and those of us who knew him well will longingly remember those days when we could join the charge by his side.

Questions

1. One of Feingold’s claims is that McCain was fun. How does he support this claim?
2. Feingold suggests there are several traits important to the presidency that McCain possessed. Find these traits and put them in your own words.
3. Feingold writes, “By this time, John and I were no longer just a political odd couple.” What inferences can you make about the term “odd couple”?
4. What is Feingold suggesting about McCain in the paragraph in which he describes the latter’s encounter with David Petraeus in Iraq?
5. Do some research: Bearing in mind the party differences, how does Feingold’s opinion of McCain differ from President Trump’s?