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Service to America: Meridian, MS

March 31, 2008



Thank you. It's good to be back in Meridian. As you might know, I was once a flight instructor here at the air field named for my grandfather during my long past and misspent youth. And it's always good to be in Mississippi, which you could call my ancestral home. Generations of McCains were born and raised in Carroll County, on land that had been in our family since 1848. The last McCain to live on the property, which the family called Teoc, was my grandfather's brother, Joe McCain. I spent a couple summers here as a young boy, and enjoyed it immensely. I had never had a permanent address because my father's naval career required us to move frequently. But here, in the care of my very likeable Uncle Joe, I could imagine, with a little envy, what it must have been like for the McCains who came before me to be so connected to one place; to be part of a community and a landscape as well as a family.

By all accounts, the McCains of Carroll County were devoted to one another and their traditions; a lively, proud and happy family on the Mississippi Delta. Yet, many McCains left here as young men to pursue careers in what has long been our family's chosen profession - the United States Armed Forces. My great-grandfather was the sheriff and never left. But his brother, Henry Pinkney McCain, was a major general in the Army, and organized the draft in World War One. Camp McCain in Grenada, Mississippi is named for him. My great uncle, William McCain, was known as "Wild Bill" for his "dynamic" personality - he was reputed to have ridden his horse onto his future father-in-law's porch to ask him for his daughter's hand. He chased Pancho Villa with General Pershing, was an artillery officer in World War One, and retired a Brigadier General. Both men are buried at Arlington National Cemetery, as are my father and grandfather. We trace my family's martial heritage back to the Revolution. A distant ancestor served on General Washington's staff, and it seems my ancestors fought in most wars in our nation's history. All were soldiers - both Henry and Bill McCain were West Pointers - until my grandfather broke family tradition and entered the Naval Academy in 1902. He was succeeded there by my father, then me, and then my son.

As I noted, the naval air field here is named for my grandfather, who had an illustrious career in the Navy, and who remained proud of his Mississippi roots until the end of his life. I have only very early memories of him. I was just nine when he died. But he was an unforgettable man, a lively, colorful, though infrequent, presence in our lives. To spend time in his company was as much fun as a young boy could imagine. He loved his family, and we were spellbound by him. He was a slight man and gaunt, but he filled any room with his deep voice and high spirits. He was devoted to the Navy, but in personal comportment, he was anything but regulation. He was a rumpel, informal man, who wore a crushed cap with the crown removed that the wife of one of his aviators had given him; kept his shoes off when he worked in an office; tobacco leavings were always scattered about him, as he rolled his own with one hand; possessed a mischievous sense of humor, and was unusually close to sailors and junior officers who served under him, and revered him. They called him, "Popeye;" his family called him, "Sid;" and his fellow officers, "Slew," for reasons I never learned

After graduating from the Naval Academy, he sailed around the Philippine Islands on a gunboat captured from the Spanish, the executive officer to the great Chester Nimitz. He returned to the United States on the U.S.S. Connecticut, the flagship of Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet. He served on an armored cruiser in the First World War, escorting wartime convoys across the U-boat infested Atlantic. In 1935, after the Navy ordered that all aircraft carrier skippers must themselves have earned their wings, he trained as a pilot. He was 52 years old at the time, and a Navy Captain. By his own admission, he never learned to fly well. A subordinate recalled later, "the base prayed for his safe return each time he flew." But he managed to earn his wings, and left Pensacola to command the naval air station in the Panama Canal Zone, where I was born.

My father, Jack McCain, was an officer at a submarine base there, one of the few occasions in his adult life when he lived in close proximity to the man he admired above all others. Though they lived far apart for decades, no father and son could have been closer. My father described his father as "a very great leader and people loved him. . . the blood of life flowed through his veins . . . a man of great moral and physical courage." He had learned everything about leadership from his father, he said. Both were highly individualistic men with outsize personalities, but were completely dedicated to the United States Navy. Neither ever wanted any other life, and while both were guilty of more than a few regulation infractions, and shared a few vices, they adhered strictly to the code father had taught son: never lie, steal or cheat. Both took a great interest in the views and well-being of the men who served under them. They believed military leaders learned as much from the people they commanded as they taught them. They were demanding, but fair and compassionate commanders. "We are responsible for our men," my father once said, "not the other way around. That's what forges trust and loyalty." They shirked no duty, braved extraordinary dangers, and were exceptional leaders. They were the first father and son to become four star admirals.

My grandfather commanded the fast carrier task force in the Pacific under Admiral Halsey, and devised many of the tactics that were employed by carriers for many years after. He was instrumental in Japan's defeat, and was given a privileged place on the

deck of the U.S.S. Missouri to witness the signing of the unconditional surrender that ended the war. My father commanded a submarine in the Pacific during the war, survived several harrowing experiences, and had brought a Japanese submarine into Tokyo Harbor at the time of the surrender ceremony. Both were exhausted at war's end, but happy to have the opportunity for a brief reunion. They met onboard a submarine tender, and spent a couple of hours together. My grandfather was worn out and obviously ill. Years later, my father recalled the last words my grandfather had ever spoken to him. "Son, there is no greater thing than to die . . . for the country and principles that you believe in." After father and son parted that afternoon, my grandfather began the long trip home to Coronado. Not long after he arrived, at a homecoming party, he turned to my grandmother, and announced he did not feel well. He died a moment later of a heart attack. He had fought his war and died in service to the country he believed in.

My father could not return to the States in time for the funeral. My mother found him waiting for her to return to California from the funeral in Washington, weeping on the airport tarmac. In time, my father, the son of a legendary naval leader, would rise to an even greater command than his father had. During the Vietnam War, he commanded all U.S. forces in the Pacific, at the top of a chain of command that included, near the bottom, his son, a naval aviator on Yankee Station in the Tonkin Gulf, and later a prisoner of war in Hanoi. My father seldom spoke of my captivity to anyone outside the family, and never in public. He prayed on his knees every night for my safe return. He would spend holidays with the troops in Vietnam, near the DMZ. At the end of his visit, he would walk alone to the base perimeter, and look north toward the city where I was held. Yet, when duty required it, he gave the order for B-52s to bomb Hanoi, in close proximity to my prison.

I have lived a blessed life, and the first of my blessings was the family I was born into. I had not only the example of my distinguished male relations, and their long tradition of military service. I was fortunate to grow up under the influence of strong, capable, accomplished women; first among them, my mother, the formidable Roberta McCain; her identical twin, Rowena; my strict and imposing paternal grandmother, Catherine; and equally impressive maternal grandmother, Myrtle. For much of my childhood, my mother was the parent who raised me, my sister and brother. My father was often at sea, and she bore all the responsibilities of both parents. She moved us from base to base, often driving us across country on her own; managed our household; paid the bills; saw to our education and religious upbringing; and made of our itinerant childhood, an interesting, exciting time, rich with fascinating experiences. She was and is a resilient woman, extroverted, uncomplaining, forthright and determined, who greets every challenge as an opportunity to measure one's strength of character and learn about the wider world beyond our immediate environment.

The family I was born to, and the family I am blessed with now, made me the man I am, and instilled in me a deep and abiding respect for the social institution that wields the greatest influence in the formation of our individual character and the character of our society. I may have been raised in a time when government did not dare to assume the responsibilities of parents. But I am a father in a time when parents worry that threats to their children's well-being are proliferating and undermining the values they have worked to impart to them. That is not to say that government should dictate to parents how to raise their children or assume from parents any part of that most personal and important responsibility. No government is capable of caring for children as attentively and wisely as the mother and father who love them. But government must be attentive to the impact of its policies on families so that it does not through inattention or arrogance make it harder for parents to have the resources to succeed in the greatest work of their lives - raising their children. And where government has a role to play, in education, in combating the threats to the security and happiness of children from online predators, in helping to make health care affordable and accessible to the least fortunate among us, it must do so urgently, effectively and wisely.

Tax policy must not rob parents of the means to care for their children and provide them the opportunities their parents provided them. Government spending must not be squandered on things we do not need and can't afford, and which don't address a single American's concern for their family's security. Government can't just throw money at public education while reinforcing the failures of many of our schools, but should, through choice and competition, by rewarding good teachers and holding bad teachers accountable, help parents prepare their children for the challenges and opportunities of the global economy. Government must be attentive to the impact on families of parents who have lost jobs in our changing economy that won't come back. Our programs for displaced workers are antiquated, repetitive and ineffective. Many were designed for a time when unemployment was seasonal or a temporary consequence of an economic downturn, not for a time when systemic changes wrought by the growing global economy have, while promising undreamt of opportunities for ourselves and many historically poor societies, have cost too many parents the jobs they had assumed would be theirs for life.

With the loss of work and the resources it provides families, come just as injurious losses to the emotional health of families. Work provides more than an income. It is a source of self-worth, pride and sense of purpose. Children learn as much from observation as instruction. The mother or father who has lost hope along with their job can unintentionally impart that hopelessness to their children. A welfare check can't give a parent a sense of purpose. And among the most important things children can inherit from their parents is a sense of purpose, and an aspiration to be part of something bigger than themselves.

My parents taught me that, and I will always be indebted to them. But like many young people, I didn't understand the lesson very well until later in life when I needed it most. As a boy, my family legacy, as fascinating as it was to me, often felt like an imposition. I knew from a very early age that I was destined for Annapolis and a career in the Navy. In reaction, I often rebelled in small and petty ways to what I perceived as an encroachment on my free will.

I concede that I remember with affection the unruly passions of youth, and how they governed my immature sense of honor and self-respect. As I grew older, and the challenges to my self-respect grew more varied and serious, I was surprised to discover that while my sense of honor had matured, its defense mattered even more to me than it did when it was such a vulnerable thing that any empty challenge threatened it.

Like most people, when I reflect on the adventures and joys of youth, I feel a longing for what is lost and cannot be restored. But though the happy pursuits of the young prove ephemeral, something better can endure, and endure until our last moment of life. And that is the honor we earn and the love we give when we work and sacrifice with others for a cause greater than our self-interest. For me that cause has long been our country. I am a lucky, lucky man to have found it, and am forever grateful to those who showed me the way. What they gave me was much more valuable and lasting than the tribute I once paid to vanity.

I am the son and grandson of admirals. My grandfather was an aviator; my father a submariner. They were my first heroes, and their respect for me has been one of the most lasting ambitions of my life. They gave their lives to their country, and taught me lessons about honor, courage, duty, perseverance and leadership that I didn't fully grasp until later in life, but remembered when I needed them most. I have been an imperfect servant of my country for many years. But I am their son, and they showed me how to love my country, and that has made all the difference for me, my friends, all the difference in the world.

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