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Service to America: John McCain's Remarks In Prescott, Arizona

April 5, 2008

Thank you. As everyone familiar with Arizona politics knows, Prescott is where Barry Goldwater formally began his Senate campaigns and his campaign for the presidency on the steps of the Yavapai County Courthouse. As his successor and in deference to his tradition, I have ended all my Senate campaigns here.

Prescott, Arizona's territorial capital, occupies a special place in the history of Arizona, and in the Goldwater legend. Barry's grandfather, Michael, opened a dry goods store here. Mo Udall's grandfather, David, served in the legislature. David Udall was prosecuted for perjury in a land claim dispute. Michael Goldwater posted his bail. The former was the patriarch of what would become the most prominent Democratic family in Arizona. The latter was the patriarch of Arizona's most famous Republican family. The Goldwater and Udall families began with that long ago act of generosity a long friendship. The grandsons of Michael and David, despite differences in political parties and philosophies, were very close friends. The friendship of Barry Goldwater and Mo Udall was based in their mutual respect for each other's character, devoted service to the state they loved, and patriotism. It seems antiquated these days, but however much they might have disagreed with each other's policy views, neither man ever had any doubt that the other acted at all times out of devotion to Arizona and the United States.

Barry Goldwater, conservative icon and authentic maverick, did more than any single person to break the Democratic Party's hold on Arizona politics, and the East Coast's hold on the Republican Party. He was irascible and principled, fiercely independent and deeply patriotic. He was his own man always and his country's loyal servant.

Barry once said he was "better equipped to be a military officer than a politician. There's no greater service to this country than the defense of its freedom." That self-assessment was uncharacteristically mistaken. Barry was a superb military officer, but he was also an extraordinarily accomplished politician. That he was an unusually open, honest and no-nonsense politician did not make him unsuited for the profession, only uncommon. In uniform and in politics, Barry's purpose was the defense of freedom, and nobody before or since managed the task more ably or more colorfully. He was an authentic, original and passionate patriot.

Simply put, he was in love with freedom. He could never abide any restriction on its exercise as long as that exercise did not interfere with someone else's freedom. No matter the prevailing political sensibilities, no matter the personal risk to his career, no political gain was so important to Barry that it was worth infringing on another American's freedom.

Americans conceive of freedom in many ways: the freedom to be left alone or to join with others in a common purpose; the freedom to prosper or to waste; the freedom to worship God in whatever way we choose or not to worship at all; the freedom to say whatever we like or to remain silent; the freedom to succeed or to fail; the freedom to be brave or cowardly; the freedom to be generous or selfish; to be prideful or humble; to be good or not.

Barry defended freedom in all its manifestations because he saw what freedom conferred on America -- self-determination; opportunity; the restless, striving industry that carved a civilization out of the wilderness of the West; and the distinction of being the last, best hope of humanity, the haven and advocate for all who believe in the God-given dignity of the human being.

He rose to prominence in the country he loved; became a great man, without ever losing his authentic identity. He has his own chapter in American political history because he knew where he stood and why, and his example rang as true to his countrymen as it did to him.

Like Barry, Mo Udall rose to prominence in Arizona and the country without ever losing his authenticity. He graced our nation's politics for thirty years with humility, kindness and a legendary wit. Like Barry, he ran unsuccessfully for President. He had known important victories and hard defeats. And like Barry, he was never changed by either. Barry once said Mo was the most popular man in Arizona. Mo described himself as a "One-eyed Mormon Democrat from conservative Arizona, and you can't have a higher handicap than that."

The foundation in Tucson that bears his name took as its motto, "civility, integrity and consensus." Those were the attributes that distinguished Mo Udall in his public and his personal life. He was a man of great accomplishment in a tough business. But he remained throughout his life and career, a man of uncommon decency, with firm liberal principles but intent on finding common ground with people of different political views in order to serve his country better. He was famously funny, which everyone loved about him. He employed humor not simply to entertain, but as a subtle instrument to calm troubled waters; to instruct the uninformed; to humble the arrogant, and to inspire us all to be better and to do better. "The best political humor," he said, "has a little love behind it. It's the spirit of the humor that counts ... over the years it has served me when nothing else could." It served us well, too.

Barry and Mo, a proud conservative and a liberal reformer, went to Washington to fight for what they believed was right for this country. They were more often than not on opposite sides of the great debates of their time. But the personal regard they had for each other, and their deep love of this beautiful state, made it easy for them to work together often on behalf of Arizona. Both men also shared a personal commitment to improving the lives of Native Americans. "Never lie to them," Mo once told me, "they've been lied to enough." One journalist, who described the relationship between another conservative and Mo Udall, could have been describing the friendship of Barry and Mo. "It was one man saying to another, we disagree in politics but not in life. ... Party political differences cut only so deep. Having made that step, they found much to agree on and many useful ways to work together."

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Barry Goldwater and Mo Udall were the famous sons of Arizona pioneer families. I was forty-five years old when I moved to Arizona, and finally found a home and the comfortable feeling of belonging to something smaller than a nation. I was introduced to Arizona by my wife, Cindy, whose love for this place I soon shared. Guided by her superior judgment, to which I am always indebted, we made the decision to raise our children here. This place has come to mean so much to me for many reasons. But first among them, is my family, whose happiness and mine is inseparable from our love of life in Arizona.

When I entered politics here, I was viewed with resentment by some for my lack of an Arizona pedigree. And in truth, although I worked hard, I did not know as much about the state as one of its representatives to Congress should know. Moreover, in my two terms in the House, I had the reputation of an often confrontational partisan.

Mo Udall was the Chairman of the House Interior Committee, a Democratic Party elder, accomplished legislator, one of the most respected members of the House, and, of course, a beloved and revered figure in Arizona. In the current political culture, the differences between Mo and me, in our politics, personalities, and backgrounds would make our friendship and occasional political alliance seem an unlikely development. But we were friends, and we did work together to protect the natural heritage and resources of the state we served, and on behalf of the Native Americans who live here. That was almost entirely Mo's doing, and I am as grateful to him as I am to any person for teaching me not only how to be a better public servant, but a better man.

I was the most junior minority member of the Interior Committee. After the first Committee hearing I attended, I was surprised when the Chairman asked to speak to me privately. We talked about some of the issues the Committee would address that year, and he advised me that Arizonans had a tradition of working together in Congress, despite differences in party affiliations, on issues important to the state. He reminded me that he and Barry were good friends, and expressed the hope that he and I would be too. I was bowled over by his gesture and left the meeting convinced that a relationship with Mo Udall would be the biggest break I was likely to receive at the start of my political career. As it turned out, it was one of the biggest breaks of my life.

In the spring of my first year in Congress, Mo invited me to accompany him to Casa Grande, Arizona, where he was going to hold a press conference to talk about issues before the Committee affecting the state. His stature in Arizona was infinitely greater than mine. He could turn out a much bigger crowd than any group willing to waste a Saturday afternoon listening to me. He spoke first and very knowledgably. As he addressed each issue, he would preface his comments with, "Congressman McCain and I are working on this." Of course, we weren't. Not me, anyway, not yet. I barely understood the difference between the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, and couldn't tell a copper mine from a cotton farm. At the end of his performance, he paused and said he was more interested in my thoughts on the issues. I gulped and managed to spend a few minutes faking some competence without completely embarrassing myself.

I knew Mo's affected confidence in me was an act of kindness and offered with the trust that I would eventually learn enough about the issues to warrant his faith. He was deliberately sharing his prestige with me to help me build greater credibility with my constituents, an uncommonly generous thing to do on behalf of a member of the opposite party. But Mo never saw me as a threat or even as an uninformed, inexperienced and somewhat presumptuous politician. To him, I was a well-intentioned servant of my country, and a fellow Arizonan, who might someday be able to help him accomplish important things for our state. He trusted me, and I wanted very much to convince him that he had not made a mistake.

We drove back together to Phoenix that day without our staffs present. I listened to Mo talk about Arizona, about Barry and the territorial politics their families had figured so prominently in. All of it was fascinating and useful to me as I struggled to understand my new profession and my new state. We parted that day as friends, and friends we remained for the rest of his life.

We have many challenges before our country, both at home and abroad: challenges such as entitlement reform, energy security, health care, the housing crisis, and a global threat from Islamic extremists, to name a few of the most important, that require a strict attention to our responsibilities as public servants and our recognition that we cannot discharge those responsibilities to the satisfaction of the people we serve unless we work cooperatively across party lines without compromising our principles. Despite the increasing harshness of our debates, and the lack of respect it often occasions for each side's good will, I still believe we can and must come together on issues that cannot be addressed without our cooperation. Mo Udall and Barry Goldwater taught me to believe that we are Americans first and partisans second, and I want to be a President that honors their faith in us.

We have our disagreements, we Americans. We contend regularly and enthusiastically over many questions: over the size and purposes of our government; over the social responsibilities we accept in accord with the dictates of our conscience; over our role in the world and how to defend our security interests and values in places where they are threatened. These are important questions; worth arguing about. We should contend over them with one another. It is more than appropriate, it is necessary that even in times of crisis, especially in times of crisis, we fight among ourselves for the things we believe in. It is not just our right, but our civic and moral obligation.

But we deserve more than tolerance from one another, we deserve each other's respect, whether we think each other right or wrong in our views, as long as our character and sincerity merit respect, and as long as we share, for all our differences, for all the noisy debates that enliven our politics, a mutual devotion to the sublime idea that this nation was conceived in -- that freedom is the inalienable right of mankind, and in accord with the laws of nature and nature's Creator.

We have so much more that unites us than divides us. We need only to look to the enemy who now threatens us, and the benighted ideals to which Islamic extremists pledge allegiance -- their disdain for the rights of Man, their contempt for innocent human life -- to appreciate how much unites us.

Let us argue with each other then. By all means, let us argue. Our differences are not petty, they often involve cherished beliefs, and represent our best judgment about what is right for our country and humanity. Let us defend those beliefs. Let's do so sincerely and strenuously. It is our right and duty to do so.

Let us exercise our responsibilities as free people. But let us remember, we are not enemies. We are compatriots defending ourselves from a real enemy. We have nothing to fear from each other. We are arguing over the means to better secure our freedom, promote the general welfare and defend our ideals. It should remain an argument among friends; each of us struggling to hear our conscience, and heed its demands; each of us, despite our differences, united in our great cause, and respectful of the goodness in each other.

Ten years have passed since Barry Goldwater and Mo Udall, the best of friends, honorable public servants and Arizona's favorite sons, died in the same year. But their example showed us how to be better Americans, better people. I intend to wage this campaign and to govern this country in a way that they would be proud of me as I have always been proud of them.

Thank you.

