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DAVID BROOKS INTERVIEW
JOHN MCCAIN: FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS
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DAVID BROOKS
Journalist, *The New York Times*
November 08, 2017
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 37 Minutes

START TC: 01;00;00;00

QT: 01;00;06;12

TITLE

Covering John McCain

QT: 01;00;10;00

DAVID BROOKS:

I began covering McCain probably in the mid-1990s. And at the time, some friends and I, Bill Crystal and some others were trying to re-launch the Republican Party maybe with a little more progressive direction, and we had something called national greatness conservatism, which was really descended from Alexander Hamilton and Abraham Lincoln, and especially Teddy Roosevelt. We were looking for a sort of reforming conservative of that sort. It was not libertarian.

QT: 01;00;34;19

DAVID BROOKS:

But pretty conservative. Liked business, liked immigration, tough on foreign policy, idealistic democracy promotion abroad. And McCain fit the bill in every way. And so it was really at first an intellectual attraction. Just the way he conducted himself at the Senator, and the things he stood for. And I began to get to know some of the people on the staff, and then I got to know him. And we really saw him of the future of the Republican Party.

QT: 01;00;58;02

TITLE

McCain's ideology

QT: 01;01;02;04

DAVID BROOKS:

Ideologically, McCain has moved around. He's primarily, I think, an honor driven person. And so when I first got to know him, he was driven by a sense that something dishonorable was going on. Whether it was corruption at Boeing, whether it was the campaign finance system, he was really a missile that aimed itself at anything dishonorable. So I wouldn't say there was a broad overarching philosophy, but he was always a reformer. He always liked the idea, "We gotta reform this, reform that." And at that time, I think he was—he was trending more moderate, more of a center right, more of a fusing government to do good things, for—but being for the market.

QT: 01;01;46;10

DAVID BROOKS:

I think when he began running for president the second time, and as he got closer to the nomination, he became a more orthodox Republican, and that led to the selection of Sarah Palin. And then I think in the last couple years, he's trended back to what I think of as his true self. And a lot of that might have driven by politics. A lot of that I think he got disillusioned with some of the people who were supporting him and—before, and liked the fact that he was getting supported by the top of the Republican Party. And so he drifted right for sure as the party drifted right, as he wanted to lead it. Now, in these later days, he's drifted back to the honor driven guy who is just disgusted by overrideologization and the libertarian free market tide that has taken over the party.

QT: 01;02;38;12

TITLE

McCain's authentic inner voice

QT: 01;02;43;00

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, well stubborn is the word, you know? None of us like to be unpopular in our workplace. And I've seen McCain be unpopular time and time again, sometimes for excellent reasons, sometimes for not great reasons. But he is a man who is driven by his own convictions, and I would say he's one of the few politicians I've ever covered who has an authentic inner voice. Even when he does things that are not great, embracing the Confederate Flag while running for—in South Carolina, he knows he's not doing something great.

QT: 01;03;17;10

DAVID BROOKS:

Most politicians I cover, they rationalize it to themselves, and so there's no honest interior voice there. But whether it was the POW experience or whatever or some other cause, McCain has never been able to lie to himself very well. And so, even when he compromises for political reasons, he's knows he's compromising some piece of himself. And I think there's some piece of himself that feels pretty bad about it.

QT: 01;03;39;05

TITLE

McCain's moral code

QT: 01;03;43;13

DAVID BROOKS:

I think it—it comes from his dad and from his granddad and from his mom. They fiercely—he grew up with a moral code, and it was a code that preached honor and glory, sacrifice for country. And the stories he tells on the campaign trail, he tells more stories about other people's heroism than any other politician I've ever covered. They're all about that kind of honor and glory. And it's really a Roman and Greek moral system. The ideas that we should strive for eternal fame and be worthy of fame, not just fame in the low sense, but be worthy of

honorable fame 'cause we did something big for the country. And whether that's in the prison, or whether that's in the realm of politics. And for somebody with a Roman and Greek honor code, public service is the highest calling. And I think that's why he's devoted his life to that.

QT: 01;04;32;15

TITLE

McCain's Teddy Roosevelt style of politics

QT: 01;04;36;21

DAVID BROOKS:

McCain had a style of politics, which I think was a Teddy Roosevelt style of politics. If traditional liberals believe in big government to enhance equality, and traditional conservatives, Republicans, believe in shrinking government to enhance freedom. McCain stood with this Roosevelt idea, limited but energetic government to enhance social mobility.

QT: 01;04;57;07

DAVID BROOKS:

And so he was willing to use government to smash up the oligarchies that were keeping people down, that were stifling people's ability to become capitalists. And so he was—he would be capable of using government, whether it was to combat global warming or something else. So he was never a liberal, but he was never a no government conservative. And so, people saw pieces of him on both sides.

QT: 01;05;21;19

TITLE

McCain, the politician and the 2000 presidential campaign

QT: 01;05;27;13

DAVID BROOKS:

He's not always authentic but he's more authentic than everybody else. And you know, he's personable. When I would ride around in the 2000 presidential campaign was the most fun I've ever had as a political journalist. We would get in the van, and he would do events. Say in South Carolina, you want to hit three media markets every day. So we'd get in the van. We'd ride with him in the morning to an event, get back in the van, ride across the state to another event, get back in the van, another state to an event. And everything was transparent.

QT: 01;05;58;12

DAVID BROOKS:

He had no money. And so he needed us to broadcast everything. And we were sitting there throughout the campaign right—they were planning the ads. They were writing the speeches. They were talking about the strategy. And some of us journalists were just sitting there. So we got to see absolutely everything, and he was completely honest and open. And you know, I figured in those rides, the way to get McCain talking was to find somebody he didn't like, and just remind him of it. And so you'd get in at like six in the morning in a van, and you'd say, "McCain—Senator, did you see what Rick Santorum said?" He'd go, "Oh, **(Expletive)** asshole."

QT: 01;06;36;16

DAVID BROOKS:

And then he'd go off, and his tooth—his mouth would just go. And he'd talk, and talk, and talk, and who he didn't like, who he did like. And it was great. We got to see absolutely everything. And then later after he got real momentum, some journalists came in who didn't know how to deal with McCain. And so they were trying to do all these gotcha questions, and they put him on the defensive, and he would begin to close down. But if you were just willing to ride the circus and have fun with him, then he was the best show I've ever covered.

QT: 01;07;07;03

TITLE

The 2000 presidential campaign

QT: 01;07;12;15

DAVID BROOKS:

No, I think McCain easily could have won in 2000. He had this huge, New Hampshire. And then we got South Carolina. He had all the momentum on his side. He was the fresh face. He had the whole media on his side. We were his base. And then what happened in South Carolina, which was the pivotal state there, was that Bush and some of his people did some dirty tricks. And there were some allegations about race. And McCain and his people, John Weaver and Mark Salter, I think they took it too personally. They decided something really disgraceful and dishonorable was being done, and they had to hit back.

QT: 01;07;50;07

DAVID BROOKS:

And they hit back too rashly, and sometimes in a way that seemed to assault the entire Republican Party and sometimes seemed to insult a lot of the key, especially some of the evangelical figures. And so, I think their sense of honor and courage was riled up, and I think they lost a little of that control. And of course that's always the problem if you're gonna campaign like McCain. Very instinctual, seat of the pants.

QT: 01;08;15;11

DAVID BROOKS:

As somebody said, "McCain is not the guy driving the aircraft carrier. He's the guy in the plane alone, flying the plane off and onto the aircraft carrier." And that's a—that's just a lone wolf kind of operation and so it's all instinctual. And I think they got their instincts a little out of whack in the heat of battle and I think if they had kept on track, I think he had the superior vision. He had all the momentum. I think he could have—I think he could have won that nomination.

QT: 01;08;42;20

TITLE

The virtue McCain aspires to most

QT: 01;08;48;15

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, we all have the one virtue we aspire to most. For some of us, believe it or not, for me, I'm a pundit, and humility is the one I'd like to possess. For McCain, it's courage. Courage is the essential trade. It's what he has written books about. And if you're gonna be a soldier or a fighter or a pilot, that's the courage you need. So he admires courage in others, and he insists upon it on himself. And courage comes in many forms. The kind he displayed in Vietnam. But also intellectual courage and moral courage in politics. Because the demands to compromise and to get along with everybody else, are just insistent.

QT: 01;09;26;15

DAVID BROOKS:

And to be able to stand up when the winds are blowing in your face, and when it's gonna cost you, is a very, it's a seductive form of compromise. And he fell for it in the heat of battle. When you're in a campaign, it's not just yourself you're representing, all these people are working for you. A whole movement has arisen beneath you. You don't want to let them down by losing. So I don't think he ever had what a lot of politicians have, is the fear of failure. But I think he had a sense of responsibility for the team, and so he went along, against his best instincts, and he had trouble living with himself after that. So going back and correcting the mistakes he made about the Confederate Flag in South Carolina was an act of penance that I can't think of another example.

QT: 01;10;12;20

TITLE

McCain's relationship with the media in 2000 vs 2008

QT: 01;10;18;04

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, in 2000 I got an invite somehow to his birthday party. And I thought, "Great, I'll—he's invited some journalists to his party." And so I got to a restaurant in the Upper East Side in New York, and I open the door, and I walk in. And he hasn't invited a couple of journalists to his party, everybody in there was a journalist. It was like, Dan Rather, William Saphire, like Charlie Rose, Chris Matthews, every big name journalist in America was in that room. And that was the base.

QT: 01;10;48;15

DAVID BROOKS:

And that was part politics. And it was just part who he liked hanging around with. The journalists can be, believe it or not, sort of fun to be around. And there's some of the people who were hanging around that campaign, on the journalistic side, Michael Lewis I'm thinking of, are just great to be around, super fun. So I think he really—I mean, one of the secrets about McCain is, POW or not POW, he was always the most fun guy in the room. He always wanted to take you places and just have an adventure every single day.

QT: 01;11;17;02

DAVID BROOKS:

And so the campaign in 2000 was very much media based. The campaign in 2008 was the opposite. To me, the pivotal moment was my newspaper wrote a story that frankly, was not adequately sourced and explored, sorta making the allegations that he had had an affair, but without really nailing it down. And that particular story did not re—read out well on the New York Times. But I think McCain took it very personally, like, "I've been friends with all these people, and now look how they're treating me."

QT: 01;11;49;06

DAVID BROOKS:

So we were—we were out. And so if the media was very much in McCain world in 2000, we were the enemy by 2008. And so his attitude toward us had changed. And so the campaign had become much more opaque, and ideologically, he became a much more normal Republican. And there are times when McCain was not completely recognizable in that campaign. And then when I was with him in those days, every question was about Barack Obama. And I could see him, he would get riled up that, you know, it's all about this other guy. But you know, what about me? I'm the maverick. And so it was—the whole tone was incredibly different from 2000 to 2008.

QT: 01;12;31;04

TITLE

The 2008 presidential campaign and the media

QT: 01;12;37;09

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I think the media fell in love with Barack Obama, and you know, myself included. But in some ways in 2008, the McCain story was even more dramatic, 'cause he really was dead in the water in the beginning of that primary campaign and he just worked his way through town hall after town hall, and won the thing on the back of A, just sheer hustle, but B, his ability to actually connect to people. And he could be a good speechmaker, that's for sure, but he could be an amazing town hall performer. And he would rally people in small groups. And in some ways, that was as impressive, just a political feat of connecting to voters as you could imagine.

QT: 01;13;22;00

DAVID BROOKS:

I think what happened to McCain in 2000 and Obama in 2008 were exceptional where the media really was bewitched by a candidate. And so I think what happened after that in both candidate's cases actually is that our coverage returned to normal. And it's annoying. Our coverage is annoying, 'cause we're trying to tell the truth as we see it, it's never quite the truth as the candidate and the campaign sees it, so it's just always gonna be annoying. And I think if you react to it with hostility, you end up making it worse. And that's a little what happened in 2008.

QT: 01;13;52;23

TITLE

Sarah Palin as a turning point in 2008 and the rise of anti-intellectualism

QT: 01;13;58;15

DAVID BROOKS:

The big moment for me in 2008 was at the convention, when he picked Palin. And I still was buddies with a lot of people in McCain world, and they split very quickly. And some of the people were deeply disillusioned. Immediately, they

knew exactly what he had done, why he had done it, and they were very disillusioned. And you began to see feuds.

QT: 01;14;19;10

DAVID BROOKS:

And a McCain campaign was never going to be an organized General Electric, IBM operation. It's always gonna—was gonna be controlled chaos. But I think in the pressure of that selection, and then in the bigness of the campaign, it got to be chaos cubed. And some of the people there were in-fighting with others. People were getting fired. And by the end of the campaign, I think a lot of us looked at the chaos we were hearing about within the campaign, thinking, "Can this guy run the White House?" And so I think the bad blood within the campaign just got—just got pretty bad.

QT: 01;14;57;18

DAVID BROOKS:

You know, politics is about serving. And you can't serve if you don't win. And he was behind. It was a long shot. And so he could justify the pick by saying, "I had the—hail Mary pass. I had to try something." I think—and I don't think he could have known this at the time, frankly, the research wasn't thorough enough, but in picking Sarah Palin, he basically took a disease that was running through the Republican Party, not Palin herself, she's a normal human being, but a disease that I'll call anti-intellectualism, disrespect for facts, and he put it right at the center of the party. And so she was a chapter in the rise of a cheap kind of populism that has since born fruit in Donald Trump. But would we have Donald Trump without Sarah Palin? I'm not sure. She was certainly a step on the path to Donald Trump.

QT: 01;15;55;05

TITLE

The compromises politicians make

QT: 01;16;00;07

DAVID BROOKS:

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Like every profession, only more so, politics has its own character challenges. One of the character challenges is that people are sucking up to you all the time. Another character challenge is, there are other people who have—think differently than you, and you've got to try to cobble together 50% of them. And you've got to try to do that every single day. And so of course, you make compromises. But show me a profession where you don't make compromises. That's what life is like.

QT: 01;16;26;19

DAVID BROOKS:

And did McCain make some compromises to try to win the election? Of course, but he thought he was going to be able to run a really good foreign policy and a much better domestic policy. And you know, I talk to politicians every day, and they say, "You don't win, you don't serve. And so you do what you have to do, and you try not to totally render yourself unrecognizable in that process." And I would say McCain compromised in 2008 as he compromised in 2000, by the way. He never rendered himself unrecognizable.

QT: 01;16;56;00

DAVID BROOKS:

He was still essentially true to his core values. And with moments here and there, in the whole course of his campaign, the banking scandal, the South Carolina flag, Sarah Palin, he had—there were stains on his record. But there are pretty few stains, given a very long record, and a long set of examples of times where he easily could have compromised and it totally would have benefited him, and he didn't go along.

QT: 01;17;21;17

TITLE

On McCain's conscience

QT: 01;17;26;10

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. I—as I say, where does a conscience come from? I think it comes from sort of the witness of the dead, the people he served with, his father. I think those

voices are still in his head saying, "No, this is the right action here." And he doesn't always listen to them, but he never can quite silence them. And he is a person, he is a weird mixture of someone who is a bad boy who wants to have fun, wants to go gambling, play craps, but he's also a very noble, magnanimous man who wants to be a great public servant. And that's—that's a pretty odd combination.

QT: 01;18;06;16

TITLE

McCain as a soldier statesman

QT: 01;18;11;07

DAVID BROOKS:

I think McCain has told the American story in a way that we needed to hear. One of the things that's jarring about him, when I think about him is, it always shocks me that, "Oh, he fought in Vietnam." I always think, "Oh, he fought in World War II, right?" 'Cause he seems like a World War II type. That's partly because he missed the 60s. He was in prison. But partly because he represents an ideal of a soldier statesman that we are more familiar with in World War II, with the George Marshall's, the Dwight Eisenhower's.

QT: 01;18;41;02

DAVID BROOKS:

And we're familiar with those men who are very masculine men, very strong men, and who say, "Hey, I wasn't born a blank slate into the world and what can the world do for me? I was born very fortunate, into a specific country. I owe—I owe a specific institution, the U.S. Navy, my service. It defines the standards by which I will live. I will try to serve. And then I will try to pass it along to somebody in slightly better shape than I received it."

QT: 01;19;10;18

DAVID BROOKS:

And that sort of institutional mindset, the love of America, the love of what America represents, and the way patriotism can—sometimes it can be a very tribal emotion, but sometimes can be a very uplifting emotion, and the stories McCain tells about America are the uplifting stories. The immigrant stories, the soldier stories, the pilot stories. And they're meant to uplift it, and tie us to one country. And in a moment when we're bifurcating and splitting up six ways from Sunday, by ethnic lines, by political lines, that was never part of him, because the American identity was always going to be stronger than any ethnic identity, even an Arizona identity. He was a nationalist in the best way.

QT: 01;19;58;01

TITLE

McCain's personality

QT: 01;20;03;10

DAVID BROOKS:

He's just the most fun person to be around. I remember once, somebody was making a movie about his time in prison, and we went down to New Orleans, and they set up a mock Hanoi Hilton. And he toured it with one of his prisoner buddies, a Medal of Honor winner named Bud Day. And we walk onto the set, and there are all these Vietnamese guys dressed in prisoner uniforms, or prison guard uniforms.

QT: 01;20;27;11

DAVID BROOKS:

So suddenly, you see McCain walking into what looked exactly like the Hanoi Hilton, surrounded by Vietnamese guys looking like guards. And Bud Day was, "Whoa, I'm back here." And McCain was not phased. He was like, "Hmm. This is weird." And we walked through it, he was like very nice to the guards, signing all the autographs and all this kinda stuff.

QT: 01;20;47;20

DAVID BROOKS:

And then he took me to a casino, and he taught me how to shoot craps. And because it was him picking all the numbers, I won. I won like 300 bucks. And so I

have these chips, and we're walking out of the casino, and there's a line where you cash in your chips, and McCain is a very impatient man, so he said, "Let's go." So I walked out of that casino with all my chips. I never got my money. So that burst of like a nice life, but really wanting to have fun all the time, liking sports, liking gambling, liking buddies, telling stories, just the most fun in the room, every time I've been in the room with him.

QT: 01;21;26;22

TITLE

On McCain's support of the War in Iraq

QT: 01;21;30;21

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. McCain was among those most vociferous in argument for going to war in Iraq. And I think he did it for the same reasons I did it. I think he mostly did it because he thought the Middle East could not survive filled with fundamentalism and dictatorship, and that the path to a peaceful world was to try to introduce democracy through that part of the world. You have to remember the moment, we had just been through the Cold War, and had emerged triumphant from that war. And we had see democracy miraculously take off in the former Soviet Union and South Africa, across the world. This seemed like the final frontier of tyranny.

QT: 01;22;14;00

DAVID BROOKS:

And so I—when I would see him make the case for war, and when I was with him with a lot of his advisors who supported the war, that was primarily the argument. I recall it being a high-minded argument. And what I also recall is that he understood very quickly that some people in the Bush administration, notably Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, did not share that rationale for war, did not envision democracy promotion. So he very early on, even in the first sweep of supposed victory, I think he understood that this needed to be done a different way, and you began to see lobbying against Rumsfeld vision of just get in and get out. So you can mark a debit in McCain's column for supporting the war. It was a mistake. But he gets the asterisk that I think he would have fought it very

differently, and he would have really understood the burden of democracy building in another place more than the Bush administration did.

QT: 01;23;10;09

TITLE

McCain's support of campaign finance reform

QT: 01;23;14;18

DAVID BROOKS:

Campaign finance reform made him very unpopular in the conservative movement. George Will, one of the most prominent conservative columnists, probably wrote 100 columns on why this was a terrible mistake. And in part people thought, you know, money is speech and partly it was principled. But partly, they thought McCain was sucking up to the East Coast elites, and they love campaign finance reform. And it was on that issue and on global warming and a few others that they thought McCain's not really on the team.

QT: 01;23;47;06

DAVID BROOKS:

And that's sorta true. McCain's not just a team player in that way, but I'm not sure he was for campaign finance reform because it was beloved of the New York Times at its royal page. I really don't think he cared. He was for it because he'd had a little bout of corruption scandal in his own life, and he was driven wherever he saw a stain, he was driven to go after it. And he loved going after a stain. It was—it was why he would wake up in the morning. There's some corruption here, somebody's lying there. His politics were not ideological a lot of the time; they were more like a prosecutor a lot of the time.

QT: 01;24;25;20

TITLE

The "old" Senate as a sacred institution

QT: 01;24;30;12

DAVID BROOKS:

I once almost wrote a book, I wish I had done it, on the second floor of the Russel Senate Office Building. And on that floor, Lindsay Graham had his office, Chuck Hagel had his office, Joe Biden had his office, McCain had his office. And these were senators who sometimes fought with each other, but had a great sense of camaraderie with each other. A couple of them had fought, Biden and McCain had been in the Senate forever. And the sense of love of the institution and the—the weird practices of the institution was something that I think all of the people in that floor had, that this is just a great body, and that we've inherited this thing that goes back 200 years, and has weird peculiarities to it, but it's really what makes our democracy great.

QT: 01;25;19;16

DAVID BROOKS:

And what I saw McCain repelling again and again, though it's been a losing battle, is making the Senate more like the House. The House is a more ideological place. It's a more raucous place. It's a more leadership driven place. And everything goes a lot faster there. And the Senate used to be very different, and now it's very much the same, with the same level of partisan fighting, the shortage now of really bipartisan friendship. And McCain loved, came of age in the old Senate, and I think has always loved the old Senate, and is less happy in what the Senate has become.

QT: 01;25;57;02

TITLE

On the American story

QT: 01;26;02;20

DAVID BROOKS:

One of the things I always loved seeing during the campaign was his treatment of immigrants. And American had a story, which was an exodus story, which is that we were a people who escaped oppression across the wilderness and are trying

to build a promised land. And that was the story the Puritans used to tell. That was a story that every immigrant group could accept, "Yeah, that feels like my story." That's was the story that Martin Luther King told. Exodus.

QT: 01;26;29;07

DAVID BROOKS:

And I think that was a story he was raised with. And what's happened over the last 15 years is, we've lost that story. Either we're not proud of our country in the way we were, we don't know Biblical history, so we don't know the shape of the story, so it's been replaced by a lot of different stories. There's the libertarian story, which is we're all rugged individualists, if government would get away from us. There's the tech story, which is that we're global disruptors in a global economy and we love disruption. There's the multicultural story, we're all in our own groups.

QT: 01;26;59;21

DAVID BROOKS:

And there's the Donald Trump story, which is that we're onerous peasants in the heartland who are being attacked by outsiders. And so the story that McCain told all his life is a story that's not known anymore. And without a coherent national story, like you don't have a coherent country and a country as diverse as ours.

QT: 01;27;18;20

TITLE

McCain's speech at the National Constitution Center and the ideological split in the Republican Party

QT: 01;27;24;01

DAVID BROOKS:

Oh I thought this was McCain's great moment in the twilight of his career because the Steve Bannons of the world and the Donald Trumps of the world

know what they believe. They have a belief that America is under assault from Muslims, from immigrants, from cultural elites, and they want to build walls to protect America from all those things. What bothered me about the rest of the Republican Party is they didn't buy that story, but they didn't have another story, they didn't have the conviction to tell a different story, or the courage to really be clear that they don't believe Trump's story.

QT: 01;27;58;08

DAVID BROOKS:

And so McCain's Constitutional Center speech was the first time somebody said no. We're gonna lay down a gauntlet here that we're for openness, that we're for some sort of disciplined immigration, we're gonna promote the democracy around the world and try to create a post war order the way we always have, in a new century. To me that was the moment, then, other Republicans could say, "Yeah, that's actually what I believe." And you then saw George W. Bush come out with a speech, and I think Mitt Romney got a little emboldened, Colin Powell. And so, it was somebody finally telling the opposite story.

QT: 01;28;37;11

DAVID BROOKS:

And to me, the big contrast between what John McCain believes and what the current Republican Party is concerned is the post war international order. He's primarily a foreign policy thinker, and he grew up with NATO, with the post war order. This was the idea that America creates a global order within which all the nations can thrive, and we use international organizations as a way to leverage our power even more. And Trump rejects that, the tearing down that war—post war order is part of his project. And so that's a pretty fundamental difference from the thing that John McCain has spent his whole life defending and building.

QT: 01;29;18;05

TITLE

McCain's bipartisan friendships and the healthcare bill

QT: 01;29;21;21

DAVID BROOKS:

His public service has been so deeply intertwined with friendships. And a lot of the friendships have been with Democrats. Ted Kennedy, Joe Biden. He loved Mo—Morris Udall, who was a Democratic member of the House who ran for president back in the 70s. He quotes Udall all the time. And so, out of that sense of friendship came a belief that party was not everything. And out of that sense of his own past came a direct experience with crafting compromise legislation. And sometimes it was done through committees, and sometimes it was done through gangs, the Gang of Eight, and they were bipartisan. And there was, since the other half of the country exists, you gotta deal with them.

QT: 01;30;02;13

DAVID BROOKS:

And so he would craft a compromise general bill on immigration reform, and it wasn't filled with everything her loved, but it was an act of politics. And what he had seen was a group of people like Ted Cruz come in, say, "We don't need to compromise. We're gonna get 100% what we want, and we can blow up the institution in order to get it." And I think that just was an insult to his whole life's work. And so when he came back, he insisted on, "Hey, you know, maybe before we pass a piece of legislation, we should hold some hearings about it." It could seem like this is nursery school level. Like, you go to the doctor, "I'm gonna operate, then I'll have a diagnosis." No, maybe you should do the diagnosis first. Like, this is not complicated stuff here.

QT: 01;30;41;16

DAVID BROOKS:

But he stated the obvious. And not only did he state it, but when the healthcare thing came up for the vote, it was a pretty—there had been a lot of dramatic moments in McCain's career, but doing the thumbs down on that vote, he did it so quickly, and so decisively, and like it was not a big deal, but it was heard around Washington. And it made him a lot of enemies, but I think it was a service to the country. Whatever you think of the bill, you shouldn't pass major legislation the way they were doing it.

QT: 01;31;08;14

TITLE

McCain vs Trump and the leadership class

QT: 01;31;12;15

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, Trump has taken the Republican Party and turned it on its head. In its views of foreign affairs, McCain is an internationalist, Trump is a nationalist. In its views of cultivating a leadership class, McCain believes in that. He went to you know, he went to the Naval Academy. Has—is friends with a lot of people who were members of the leadership class. And the quality of that class can rise and fall, and it's been falling, and Trump is against that. And so Trump comes in at a time when the party is unrecognizable to the—probably to the John McCain of 1985 or 1990. This was a guy who grew up with Reagan, and what Trump signifies is the end of the Reagan era.

QT: 01;31;58;10

TITLE

The meaning of the Greek term Paideia

QT: 01;32;03;07

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah. You know, the classical Greeks used to argue that the way we teach how to behave is through example, that we sort of publish the book of our lives by all our actions every day. And we—the other people look at us, and they approve or disapprove, but they get a sense of, "Yeah, that's how I should behave, and that's how I shouldn't behave." And this is especially powerful among our public servants, that if you're President, you should try to tell the truth. If you're Barack Obama, try to show how good family life looks like, even in a hard time, and you know, busy times. If you're John McCain and you see corruption in your own party, go after that corruption, don't put party among—come—abo—above country.

QT: 01;32;48;09

DAVID BROOKS:

And so, to me, McCain, more than anything else, he was a good legislator, but he is an especially good teacher. And he taught by example. Some of it, he wrote books on courage and things like that. But partly, he just inspired people by behavior of his example, and that was example in Vietnam, but it was example after on the campaign trail. You know, I talked to him a lot about Vietnam back in 2000, and I got the sense he was a little bored by it. He knew the—what had happened there was a great political benefit to him. But he was more interested in telling other people's stories and he was more interested in, frankly, immigrant stories and rags to riches stories. And so, those campaigns were not successful in 2000, but I think it was a great education to the country of what a certain side of a leader could look like.

QT: 01;33;38;21

TITLE

On fixing the political culture and the power of telling the truth

QT: 01;33;42;22

DAVID BROOKS:

Well, it's beyond one person to fix what's happened to our politics. But if he stands up and tells the truth as he sees it, I think that will encourage others. Because if they see the story that, say Donald Trump tells, and then they see the story that John McCain tells, they're gonna be reminded of who they are. It's very easy to abstract away from yourself in politics. The climate is so strong, the pressures are so strong, you can lose your inner voice. And if pe—McCain can remind a lot of the members of Congress who really believe in what he believes in fundamentally that, "Yeah, yeah. That is what I believe. I forgot about that." then I think he can have a powerful influence on the people around him, even if it's not about passing legislation or not about ya know, taking down this or that presidency.

QT: 01;34;31;14

TITLE

Authenticity and power of impermanence

QT: 01;34;36;11

DAVID BROOKS:

Yeah, I think McCain since his diagnosis has found his regular voice. You know, when you're in a POW camp for five years, everything that comes after that is gravy. You've faced death. And you've probably assumed you were gonna die. And so everything that comes after that is not about me, but about telling the truth and about country. And so I think one of the reasons he was so candid through life is 'cause he had already had the death diagnosis, and somehow he miraculously escaped it. And that had to be why he had the solidity to be the kind of Senator he was. And so now with another death diagnosis he just reminds me of himself more than ever. He doesn't seem like a transformed person to me. He just reminds me of, "Oh yeah, that was John McCain 2000. That's the same guy."

QT: 01;35;23;23

TITLE

Learning from the POW experience and McCain's view of torture

QT: 01;35;28;11

DAVID BROOKS:

One of the things that I've always thought drives him is that core POW experience, and being loyal to—loyal to that experience, what he learned in that experience. So the first thing I remember, we used to have all these POW/MIA flags that are up, and there used to be organizations that would tell the families of those missing in Vietnam, "Oh, they're still alive." and he thought that was so cruel. I remember his disgust at some of the organizations that were claiming they were still there, 'cause he thought it was wrong for the families. And then, when in the middle of the Iraq War, it turned out the CIA had loosened their standards what you could do to prisoners, I think that brought him back to this kernel experience of his life, and that torture was wrong, it's always gonna be wrong.

QT: 01;36;17;00

DAVID BROOKS:

It was wrong when they did it. I experienced it, and it's doubly wrong when we do it. And so those moments, anything that ties back to that, that really making of him experience in life, that transformed him from being just the wild boy to a wild boy with sobriety and a purpose, that will be fitting, frankly, if the key experience of his life, which happened in the 1960s was related to the crowning experience of his life, which was getting a good torture policy and getting accountability on torture that happened, you know, four decades later.

QT: 01;36;57;15

TITLE

McCain's New Hampshire win in the 2000 presidential primary

QT: 01;37;02;05

DAVID BROOKS:

I remember being in New Hampshire. And I remember the—I don't know if it was an image, but it captured the moment. It was a picture of McCain with a light saber from Star Wars, and it was—he was Han Solo on that night. He was a triumphant warrior against the party establishment. And it was like—it was—the only thing I've seen like it is Obama winning Iowa in 2008. Those are the two moments in my political life where all idealism was justified, and cynicism fell away from politics because somebody who truly believed in something, somebody who could express what the country wanted to hear and the best elements of what the country wanted to hear, that person had won and had won in the best possible way. That does not happen every day in politics.

END TC: QT: 01;37;53;11