



## Senator John McCain left us an important lesson and message



[STEVE SCHMIDT](#)

MAY 08, 2025

I don't mourn the loss of any terrorist's life. What I do mourn is what we lose when by official policy or official neglect we confuse or encourage those who fight this war for us to forget that best sense of ourselves. Through the violence, chaos and heartache of war, through deprivation and cruelty and loss, we are always Americans, and different, stronger and better than those who would destroy us.

— Senator John McCain

---

Is America to be an empire of cruelty and malice with secret detention sites for anyone Trump and ICE Barbie decree guilty? For something? Anything?

Thirty-nine Democrats in the House of Representatives have [signed a letter](#) to the Department of Homeland Security demanding an immediate

investigation into the Louisiana detention system regarding reports of inhumane treatment

This begs a question about why there aren't 213 Democratic House and 45 Democratic Senate signatories.

John McCain said the following upon the release of the report detaining CIA abuses of prisoners:

I believe the American people have a right — indeed, a responsibility — to know what was done in their name; how these practices did or did not serve our interests; and how they comported with our most important values.

Some fights are necessary because the fight comes to you. This fight is unavoidable because the question at stake is existential.

Here is a perfect summary of what John McCain would have regarded as the practical side of a great moral debate:

The truth is sometimes a hard pill to swallow. It sometimes causes us difficulties at home and abroad. It is sometimes used by our enemies in attempts to hurt us. But the American people are entitled to it, nonetheless.

They must know when the values that define our nation are intentionally disregarded by our security policies, even those policies that are conducted in secret. They must be able to make informed judgments about whether those policies and the personnel who supported them were justified in compromising our values; whether they served a greater good; or whether, as I believe, they stained our national honor, did much harm and little practical good.

There have been 119 Congresses, but never one as corrupt, unfit, submissive and incompetent as this one.

Ever.

Here is what the 119th Congress, which will live in infamy, has forgotten that Senator McCain would have called out as an essential moral matter:

We have made our way in this often dangerous and cruel world, not by just strictly pursuing our geopolitical interests, but by exemplifying our political values, and influencing other nations to embrace them. When we fight to defend our security we fight also for an idea, not for a tribe or a twisted interpretation of an ancient religion or for a king, but for an idea that all men are endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights. How much safer the world would be if all nations believed the same. How much more dangerous it can become when we forget it ourselves even momentarily.

The 119th Congress is a Politburo of appeasement with a few redoubts of principle and effectiveness amidst the letter writers who refuse to use their maximum power to slow, delay and arrest the madness with a constant and consistent opposition message.

It's simple: STOP!

The majority is a rubber stamp for insanity, while the minority is as feckless as any opposition that has ever been anywhere. Pathetic doesn't begin to describe it.

The Trump administration has blithely asserted powers that are both illegal and unconstitutional, but also fundamentally inhumane.

The conduct of Tom Homan, ICE's Little Eichmann, and Kristi Noem is reprehensible.



ICE Barbie wears a \$60,000 Rolex while touring an El Salvador gulag

Deported migrants are not animals, and should not be treated as such. Yet, that is what is happening behind a cloak of shame and secrecy. What is being done is being done in the name of the American people. We must demand the immediate stop to the aggressive, immoral and unlawful exercise of police state tactics, where the jackboot has stomped on our values.

Human beings, even the most evil on Earth, must be treated with humanity by the American government when they are in our custody.

The innate dignity of the human being must never be allowed to be compromised in order to sate a fetish for cruelty and revenge.

That is not justice.

Deported migrants must be treated with human dignity by every American official from the lowest to the highest.

We must talk about torture.

It is immoral.

What is happening in ICE Barbie's arbeitslagers is a form of TORTURE.

It does not measure up against American values.

It is wrong.

It is immoral.

It is unacceptable.

Thirty-nine Democratic House members have demanded an investigation into the inhumanity of the current system around which there is no oversight. Everything that is being done is being done in our name.

We are a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

The United States Constitution is the supreme law of the United States.

It is immutable unless amended. It does not exist at the whim of Donald Trump. It is perpetual and enduring.

Donald is trifling with the lives of 347 millions Americans and our birthright by taking license with something that he has no license to take.

Senator John McCain would be aghast if he could witness the grotesquerie of what the US Congress has become.

He would be raging and undaunted in his pursuit of powerful malevolences that have gathered to abuse justice by torturing the least of us for the amusement of the meanest amongst us.

His righteous anger would thunder from the floor of the United States Senate over the desecrations of American values and the cornerstones of our civilization.

It was not always like this.

I worked for President Bush, Vice President Cheney and Senator McCain.

John McCain was right about something very big that defines us as a people. It is not a new debate.

There is no issue that John McCain cared more about than human rights.

He was the chaplain in prison, and as a US senator, he performed a type of public ministry around the celebration of human rights, and specifically the rights of prisoners.

He was an unrelenting champion of prisoners of conscience, political prisoners, prisoners of war, and any human being in the custody of the United States.

He would not relent in their defense, or in the assertion of right over wrong.

I urge you to ponder the words below.

Senator McCain was intentional when he spoke them, as I am intentional in sending them to you.

I ask that we appreciate that we are part of a continuum.

Let us consider this moment with clarity.

He spoke these words from the floor of the US Senate that he loved, now contaminated by cowardice and weakness about an issue that he asserted every ounce of his moral stature to remind the American people that cruelty and revenge are the wrong path. In the end, it is the torturer who is destroyed, not the tortured.

Before laying out the moral case, McCain framed the historical importance for what he knew would not be the last word on the matter:

Perhaps this is a debate for the history books. But it is still important because Americans in a future age, as well as their leaders, might face these same questions. We should do our best to provide them a record of our debates and decisions that is notable not just for its passion but for its deliberativeness and for opinions that were formed by facts and formed with scrupulous care by both sides for the security of the American people and the success of the ideals we cherish...

...We have a duty to leave future American generations with a history that will offer them not confusion but instruction as they face their crises and challenges and try to lead America safely and honorably through them.

Both sides cannot be right, of course, but both sides can be honest, diligent and sincere.

Like most worthy causes it was a lonely fight.

It all came down to this fundamental point that John McCain tried to teach to his colleagues and the American people:

Your last resistance, the one that sticks, the one that makes the victim superior to the torturer, is the belief that were the positions reversed you wouldn't treat them as they have treated you.

He added:

This is more than a utilitarian debate. This is a moral debate. It is about who we are.

A great contestation over who we are is underway.

The darkness and the light have made contact again. The struggle ahead will pit them against one another as has happened so many times before.

Let us pray the light prevails.

We must make it so.

This is how *The Washington Post* [editorialized](#) about the ending of John McCain's fight with the Bush administration, and what happened when the United States Congress asserted its powers:

Thanks to a belated White House retreat, Congress is on the verge of taking an important step toward curtailing the systematic human rights violations committed by the Bush administration in its handling of foreign prisoners. President Bush said yesterday that he would agree to an amendment by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) prohibiting "cruel, inhuman, or degrading" treatment of all prisoners held by the United States. The president's grudging acceptance came after the House and Senate voted overwhelmingly to reestablish a standard that he wrongly chose to set aside some three years ago. Mr. Bush had threatened to veto any bill containing the amendment; Vice President Cheney campaigned for an explicit authorization for the CIA to abuse its detainees. In response, Congress sent a powerful message -- by votes of 90 to 9 in the Senate and 308 to 122 in the House -- that such policies are unacceptable, even in a global war against terrorism. That it did so was due in large part to Mr. McCain's tenaciousness, which Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.) rightly described as "a profile in courage."

The Warning with Steve Schmidt is a reader-supported publication. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.



## **Recommend The Warning with Steve Schmidt to your readers**

Explains what is happening, and why in our turbulent era. Speaks truth to power. 1 written & 1 broadcast commentary/day 6x/week.

© 2025 Steve Schmidt

[Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)

[Substack](#) is the home for great culture