

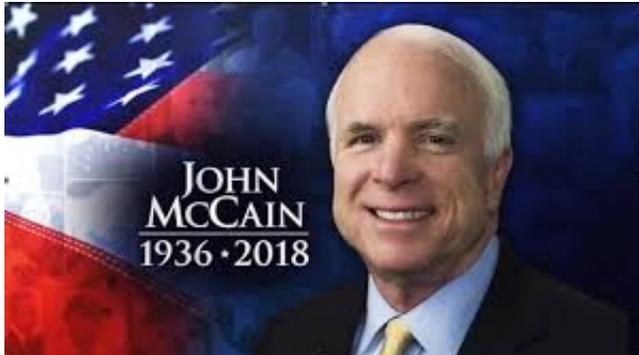


## Senator McCain, Civility, and Silent Sam

Author : Mike Smith

Categories : [Uncategorized](#)

Date : September 16, 2018



I recently read a blog post on [Inside Higher Ed](#) that made me think about something that has bothered me about the controversy swirling around Silent Sam. The post was titled [“What Campus Diversity Programs Can Learn From McCain's Funeral.”](#) The main point of the post was that Senator McCain disagreed strongly with people on various issues and yet still engaged with them respectfully on those and other issues. He treated them as political opponents rather than enemies.

Senator McCain ran unsuccessfully against President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama, and yet he asked them to speak at his funeral. Both said it was “a high honor.” Senator McCain somehow “managed to run a lengthy campaign against both Obama and Bush with the highest office in the land at stake and still treat them such that they viewed it as a high honor to speak at his funeral.” Notwithstanding profound disagreements on policy issues, they respected one another and were able to have civil, constructive discussions.

[Do you remember the moment during the 2008 presidential campaign when a woman at a town hall event told McCain that she couldn't trust Obama because he was an “Arab?”](#) This happened in the midst of conspiracy claims that Obama was not a natural-born American citizen and therefore was ineligible to be president. The path of least resistance would have been to do nothing, and that would have pleased the crowd. McCain responded immediately: “No ma'am, he's a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that's what this campaign is all about. He's not an Arab.”

Some criticized McCain for failing to point out that it didn't matter whether someone is Muslim or



Arab. Fair enough. Many in the audience booed him for defending Obama. Most agreed with the Associated Press that McCain's actions reflected political courage and a strong belief "that partisans should disagree without demonizing each other."



### McCain Takes Microphone Before Correcting Woman's Statement about Obama

The blog post asks a number of questions for faculty, staff, and students to consider "[a]t a time when various identity groups, on campuses and beyond, view it as a badge of honor to annihilate those with whom they disagree . . . ."

- "Are there people who you disagree with but still admire? (Another way to put this: Is the only way to earn your admiration to agree with you?)"
- "Are there people you disagree with who you could nevertheless benefit from engaging with a bit more? What would it take to make creating that space a priority?"
- "If you do this, would people in your identity/political group view you as a traitor? Are you willing to take the risk?"

What does this have to do with Silent Sam?



I believe those who say the statue and its history make them feel unwelcome and uncomfortable at Carolina. I also believe many of those who claim that they are not racist, and that the statue honors their heritage. As Chancellor Folt wrote in [her message to the Carolina community](#), “I hope we can agree that there is a difference between those who commemorate their fallen and people who want a restoration of white rule.” Unfortunately the battle lines have been drawn and there seems to be little room for genuine dialogue. People have been focused rigidly on their positions—take it down or leave it up—and have been unwilling to explore whether there is any common ground based on their underlying interests.

Because many seemingly have wanted “to annihilate those with whom they disagree” on Silent Sam, the issue has not served as a vehicle to improve racial understanding. So far there has been no “teachable moment.” That is my greatest disappointment about Silent Sam. I want Carolina to make progress when it comes to race and other forms of diversity. I want it to be an inclusive and supportive place for everyone—including those with political viewpoints that differ from the majority. Symbols can be powerful and emotional, and Silent Sam is a symbol that should no longer occupy a prominent place on our campus. The question now is whether Carolina can move beyond symbolism and address the underlying issues that the statue has represented for so many people. It may be even harder because of how Silent Sam was brought down. Can we become a place that honors civil dialogue and welcomes a diversity of views without demonizing those who disagree with us?



The University must “identify a safe, legal and alternative location for Silent Sam” by November 15. Already people are taking positions about what should happen to the statue. My hope is that the campus process somehow brings about a civil dialogue where people can work together respectfully to find the best possible outcome. It will be much harder with such a short timeline. Chancellor Folt set the right tone in writing that “[r]econciliation of our past and our present requires us to reach deep into our hearts and across the state to the people we serve.” Following Senator McCain’s example, I also hope that the participants can disagree without seeing one another as enemies, and that people can respect one another and bring about some greater understanding in the process.