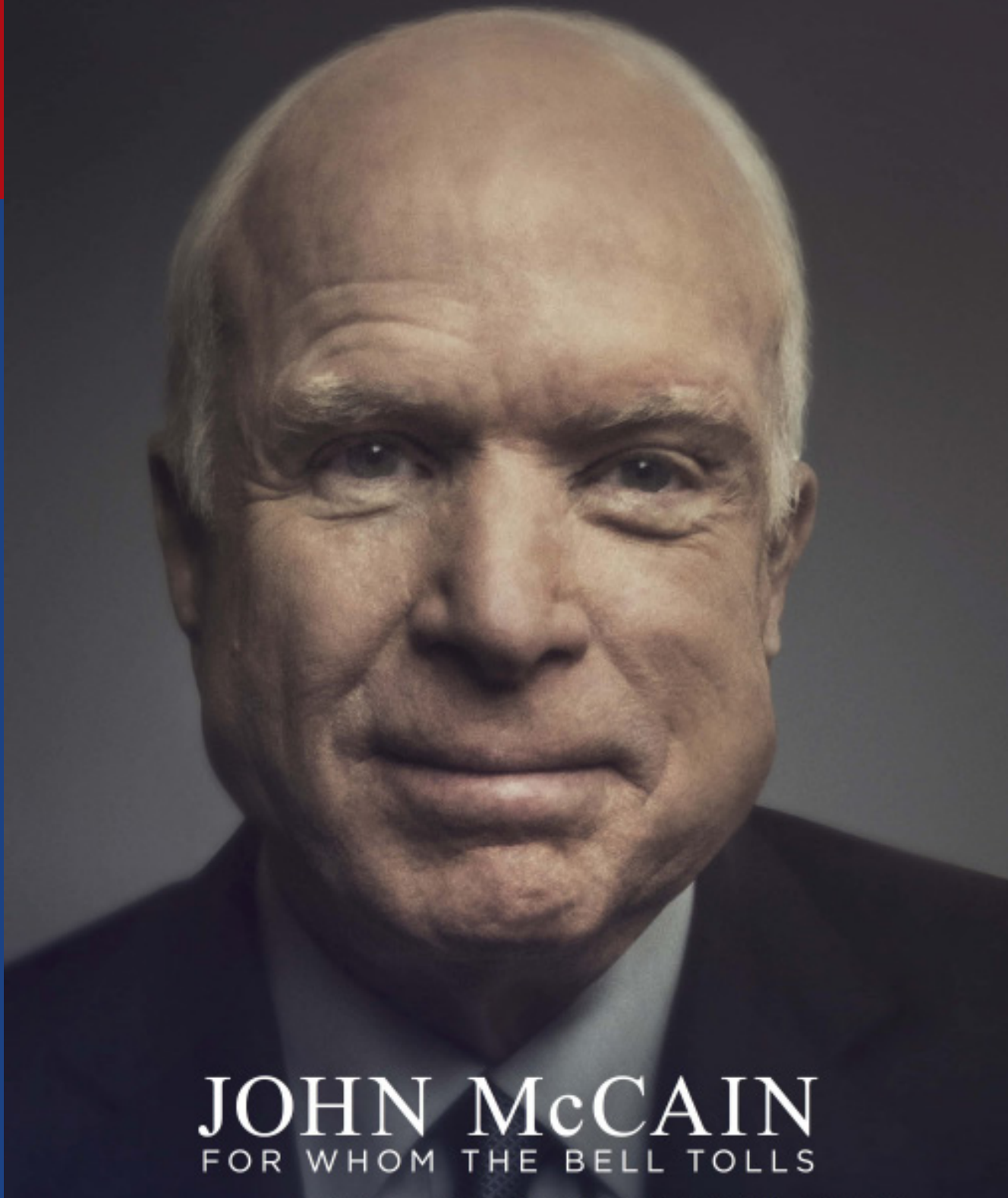


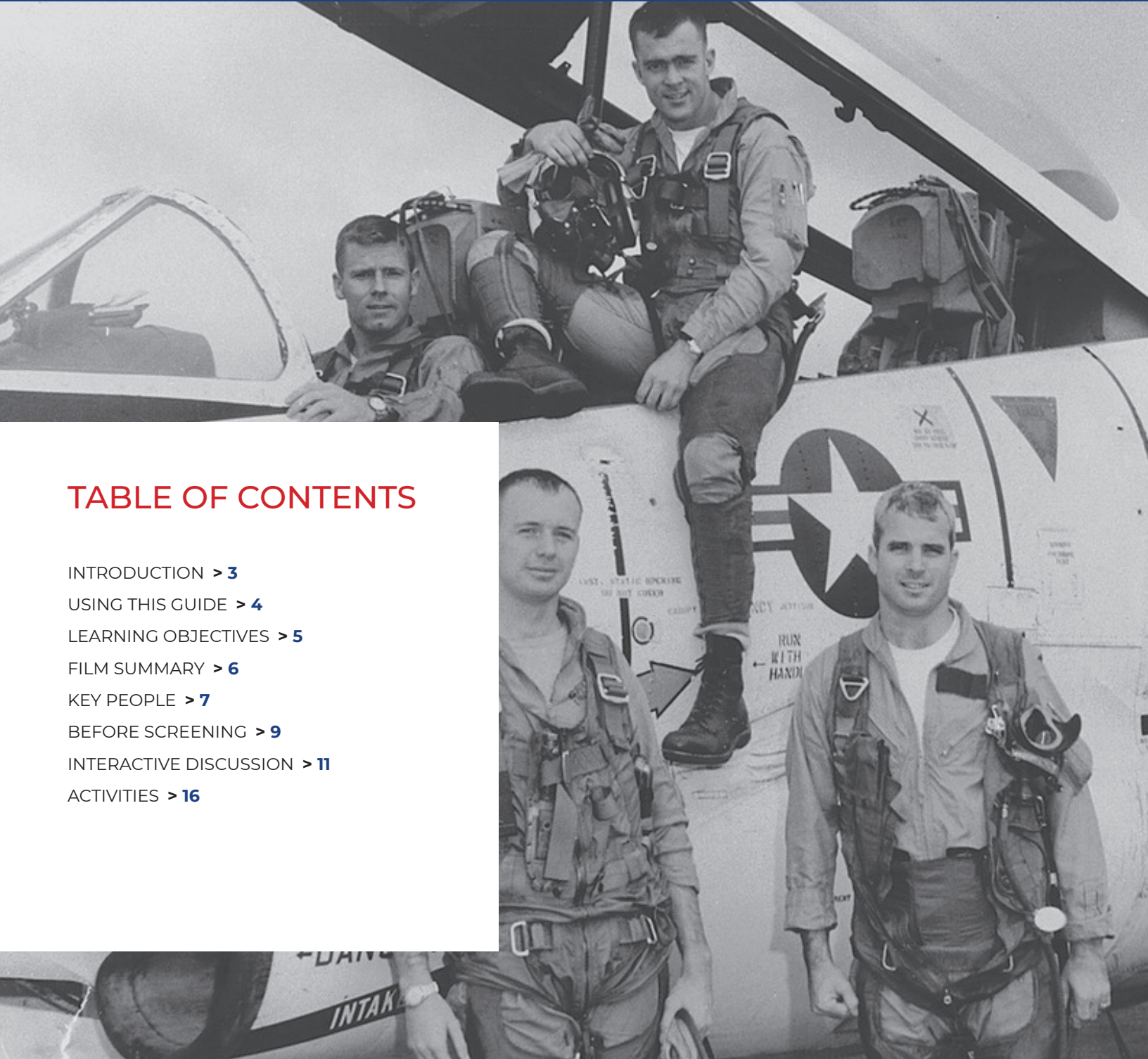
*DUTY. LOYALTY. SACRIFICE. COUNTRY.*



**JOHN McCAIN**  
FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

**ENGAGEMENT GUIDE**

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# INTRODUCTION

Legendary six-term US senator and war hero John McCain agreed to participate in this documentary near the end of his life, providing unprecedented access to his daily activities in Washington, DC, and at home in Arizona. This sweeping account combines the senator's own voice—culled from original interviews, commentary, and speeches—with archival news footage and previously unseen home movies and photographs. The film also features interviews with family, friends, colleagues, and other leading political figures. Senator McCain's continuing crusade for the causes he believed in, even during his battle with brain cancer, underscores his fighting spirit and resilience. What emerges is a portrait of a maverick with an unerring sense of duty who never forgot the most important American ideals.



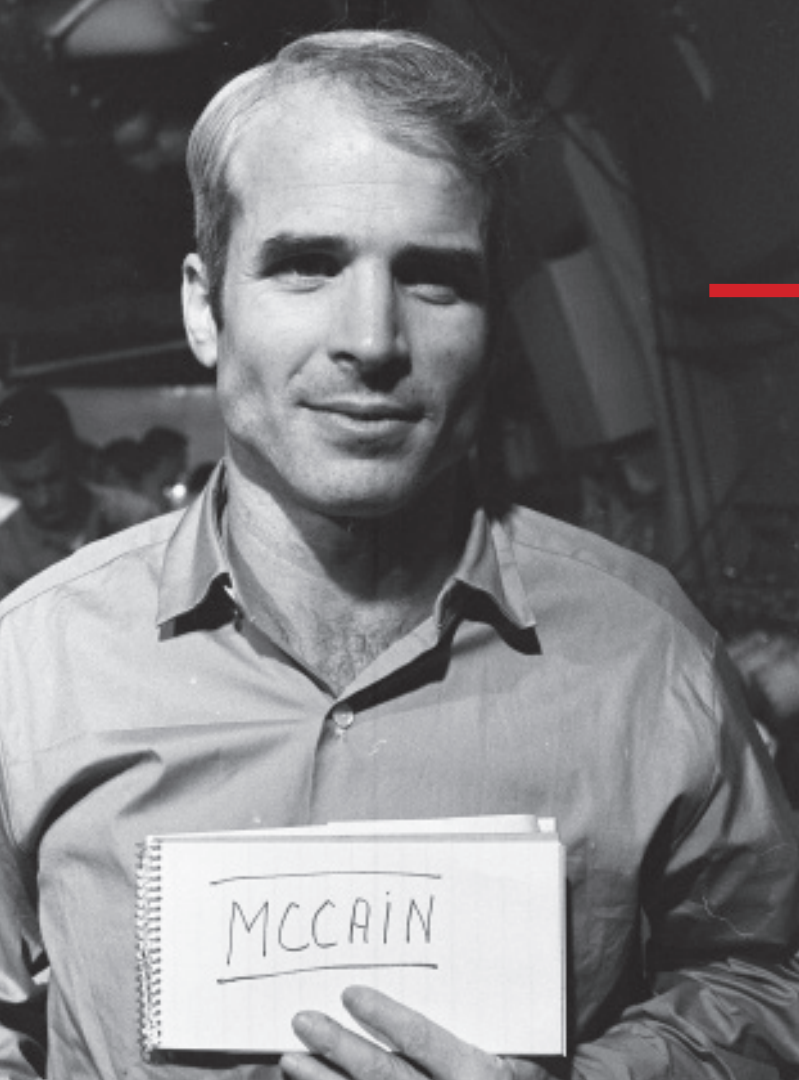
## USING THIS GUIDE

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This discussion guide is designed as a tool for high school classroom teachers and facilitators to incorporate excerpts of the 2018 HBO film *John McCain: For Whom the Bell Tolls* and over 28 hours of additional interview footage in the Interview Archive on the Kunhardt Film Foundation website. These materials are an informative and inspiring complement to teaching US history, government, and civics. They illustrate the significance of bipartisanship, moral leadership, and ethical decision-making. Through a rich visual retelling of McCain's causes and alliances, a portrait of a man dedicated to ideas, rather than party, emerges. This guide contains background information on McCain's formative years in the military, his time as a POW, and his actions and legacy as a US Senator.



**“John served our country with distinction, he sacrificed in our military as a prisoner of war. He has always tried to place country before party and I think he will be judged as a consequential leader.”**  
— HILLARY CLINTON



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The discussion guide and documentary film excerpts introduce students to one of the most influential US senators of the last century. Students who view the excerpts of *John McCain: For Whom the Bell Tolls* and resources in the Interview Archive and Photo Archive and then engage with the discussion questions and activities will be able to:

- Recognize the significance of the McCain family's commitment to military service and sacrifice, and the values it engendered in him.
- Understand McCain's political career through the lens of friendship, reform, independent thinking, and leadership.
- Reflect on the current era of partisanship in Congress and what McCain's role might have been if he were still living.



**“I think John recognized that for our democracy to work, we have to continually get involved and it matters that our leaders try to be as honest and transparent as possible. He believed politics should not exploit divisions, but rather, elevate debate and create a sense of community around a common creed.”**

— BARACK OBAMA



## FILM SUMMARY

John McCain's favorite book was Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, with its lead character, Robert Jordan, appealing to McCain's sense of duty and perseverance in the face of extreme, even impossible odds. The novel inspired McCain throughout his life, even as he battled brain cancer, which was diagnosed in 2017. In the face of a grim prognosis, he remained upbeat and grateful. "You will never talk to anyone as fortunate as John McCain," he says.

McCain's extraordinary life began with a childhood steeped in the discipline and tradition of the US military. The son and grandson of Navy admirals, he was born in 1936, when his father was stationed in the Panama Canal Zone. From a young age McCain wanted to fly, and after attending the United States Naval Academy and marrying his first wife, Carol, he enlisted as a Navy pilot during the Vietnam War. Shot down in 1967 over North Vietnam, he endured five years in the "Hanoi Hilton" POW camp, half of the time in solitary confinement. His captors, looking to capitalize on his status as an admiral's son, forced him to make a propaganda statement that he later regretted. Released in 1973 (his injuries prevented him from raising his hands over his head or walking normally), he returned home and saw his first marriage fall apart. He married his second wife, Cindy, in 1980. McCain returned to active duty, but got a "bug for politics" while serving as a Navy liaison for the Senate, and in 1982 ran as a Republican for a vacant House seat in Arizona. Despite accusations that he was a "carpetbagger" with few ties to the state, he won. A relationship with banker Charles Keating would eventually torment McCain when, after he was elected to the Senate in 1987 (succeeding Barry Goldwater), he and five other senators—the "Keating 5"—were accused of using their influence to advance Keating's agenda. Scarred by the scandal, McCain renewed his views to hold himself to the highest ideals going forward; running for president in 2000, he famously said he would "never lie" to the American people.

The film presents many watershed moments in McCain's political career, emphasizing the friendships he forged with senators across the aisle, from Joe Lieberman (an Independent who was almost his running mate in 2008) to John Kerry and Ted Kennedy. Though Kerry, also a veteran, was a vocal critic of the Vietnam War, he and McCain found common ground in advancing legislation that provided closure for families of missing soldiers while normalizing ties with Vietnam. Also detailed are McCain's two failed presidential bids: in 2000, when he won the New Hampshire primary but lost the nomination to George W. Bush after a campaign marked by negative ads and innuendo (his and Cindy's adoption of a Bangladeshi girl provoked racist comments in Southern states), and in 2008, when he was doomed by President Bush's low approval ratings and the financial collapse, losing to the then-candidate of change, Barack Obama (who praised McCain's grace in conceding defeat).

Late in his life, McCain's cancer diagnosis limited his appearances in Washington, with the notable exception of his dramatic 2017 speech chastising party-line agendas, after which he cast a deciding "nay" vote that killed a Republican-sponsored bill to replace Obamacare. To the end, McCain remained a maverick, championing causes close to his heart while remaining willing to find compromise. As his longtime colleagues, friends, and family emotionally describe their affection for him, McCain, back home in Arizona, says "Robert Jordan is still my hero.... It's been a great life, and one worth fighting for."





# KEY PEOPLE

The KFF Interview Archive features conversations with, as well as brief bios of, these key figures in McCain's life:

- > Joe Biden
- > David Brooks
- > George W. Bush
- > Bill Clinton
- > Hillary Clinton
- > Rick Davis
- > John Fer
- > Frank Gamboa
- > Lindsey Graham
- > Vicki Kennedy
- > John Kerry
- > Henry Kissinger
- > Joe Lieberman
- > Andy McCain
- > Carol McCain
- > Cindy McCain
- > Doug McCain
- > Jack McCain
- > Joe McCain
- > John McCain
- > Meghan McCain
- > Sidney McCain
- > Bill McInturff
- > Barack Obama
- > Mark Salter
- > Grant Woods



**“John and I respect each other. There are times we’ve made each other mad, but ultimately there is a friendship at the center of our relationship. I think you can differ on an issue and differ respectfully and differ passionately, and still like the person you’re differing with.”**

— JOHN KERRY





# BEFORE SCREENING



**“One thing about John that gets underestimated is how smart he is; I mean, just pure gray matter. He not only does the right thing, he’s able to articulate it. John can go well beyond whether he’s for or against a particular bill. He clarifies what the issues are and if they represent us as Americans.”**

— JOE BIDEN

Here are some suggestions for engaging students with John McCain’s personal, military, and political life, and the images and information they will encounter in the film clips. Bring these ideas into the content and the classroom routines you already use. The questions and topics are a starting point for you to build from and adapt.

One of the most unusual and significant qualities of McCain’s leadership in the Senate was his interest in—and skill at—working with Democrats across the aisle. The clips show examples of bipartisanship in diplomacy and healthcare legislation. The diverse people in the Interview Archive testify to his relationships, with conservative Republican Lindsey Graham included alongside moderate Democrat Joe Biden. McCain provides a wonderful teaching opportunity to talk about political parties through the story of someone who was not limited by them. To do so, there still may be some preparation involved in creating a safe space for students to discuss party affiliation and to highlight some of the common differences in philosophy between Republicans and Democrats without judgment.

### **Gathering Prior Knowledge**

- Have the students heard of John McCain?
- What do they know about him?

### **Exploring Terms**

- John McCain’s nickname was “The Maverick.” What personality traits do the students associate with the word “maverick”?
- What does “partisan” mean? Does it have a positive or negative connotation?

### **Current Connections**

- Ask the students to think about recent political events, legislation, court appointments, and elections. What role does party loyalty play? Can they come up with examples of members of Congress acting with or against their political affiliation?
- When politicians diverge from the expectations of their party, what effect does it have on democratic principles?





INTERACTIVE  
DISCUSSION



These excerpts from *John McCain: For Whom the Bell Tolls* focus on particularly formative periods of McCain's life, as well as significant achievements in his career. The activities and questions below are suggested starting points that may be implemented as group work, persuasive essays, research papers, or class discussion. In general, as a transition into any of these more focused questions, it's useful to gather responses from the students about what surprised them, or something new they learned while watching each film clip. And, as a general strategy for closing, harvest students' curiosity: What might they like to ask John McCain if they had the opportunity to sit in the interviewer's chair?

There are seven excerpts from the full-length documentary. View them all, or use selections and the associated discussion questions for each clip. Relevant background information and historical context are provided for each clip.



### Clip 1: Opening to *John McCain: For Whom the Bell Tolls*

Play this excerpt the first time through with no picture, just the audio, giving the students the opportunity to focus on McCain's words. Then, share the images with no audio, so the students may pay close attention to the many settings of McCain's life, both personal and professional. As time allows, view a third time with the video and audio together.

- > What do we learn in this short introduction about McCain's outlook on life?
- > What is important to him?
- > How does the character of Robert Jordan represent heroism for him?



### Clip 2: Vietnam

*\*Language advisory*

This portion of the film focuses on McCain's experience as a prisoner of war (POW). The beginning provides context about the Vietnam War and the tremendous loss of life it meant for both the US military and the Vietnamese. During McCain's time at the United States Naval Academy, he was drawn to the air and trained as a fighter pilot for the Navy's aircraft carriers. Following his graduation, he was in active service in Vietnam. McCain tells the harrowing story of being shot down and captured, and enduring torture and solitary confinement in a prison camp. The clip also addresses use of wartime propaganda and the military code of conduct.

An in-depth study of the conflict in Vietnam may not be practical if not already part of your curriculum, and it is not needed in order to understand the importance of McCain's service in the war. However, some basic background information will support comprehension. The Vietnam War was a long, expensive, and divisive conflict in which the United States allied itself with South Vietnam against the Communist government of North Vietnam. The American interest was compelled by its ongoing Cold War with the Soviet Union and in accordance with the domino theory that if one Southeast Asian country fell to Communism, many other countries would follow. US involvement escalated in 1965 when President Johnson sent troops into Vietnam. Under heavy anti-war pressure at home, President Nixon ordered the American withdrawal in 1973 and ultimately, Communist forces seized control of South Vietnam in 1975.





- > Describe the physical and psychological injury the war inflicted on McCain.
- > How would the North Vietnamese have used a recorded confession by McCain as propaganda?
- > How does McCain's refusing the offer of release reflect his character?
- > What does his five-year ordeal tell you about McCain's character, strength, and values?

### Clip 3: Anti-War Movement and Normalization of Relations With Vietnam

As the Vietnam War stretched on, and the number of American deaths and Vietnamese civilian casualties rose without evidence of progress, opposition to the war grew at home. In 1968 and 1969, there were hundreds of protest marches and gatherings throughout the country. In November 1969, the largest anti-war demonstration in American history took place in Washington DC, as more than 250,000 Americans gathered to call for withdrawal of troops. For young people, the war symbolized a form of unchecked governmental authority, while others considered opposing the government to be unpatriotic and treasonous. Support and morale within the troops suffered, and tens of thousands deserted. In this clip, we meet John McCain and John Kerry, who had very different perspectives in the midst of this divisive climate.

Following the Vietnam War, for two decades, the US had a trade embargo and no diplomatic relations with Vietnam. In 1994, President Bill Clinton lifted the embargo and established full diplomatic relations, with encouragement and support from McCain. In 1966, Clinton terminated the combat zone designation for Vietnam and nominated the first ambassador to Vietnam since 1975. An important part of this “normalization” process was also to officially recognize the soldiers who were or had been missing in action (MIAs) or imprisoned (POWs).

- > Why was it significant for the Vietnam government to “come clean” and provide a full list of all the unaccounted-for American troops?
- > What was at stake in re-establishing diplomatic relations between the US and Vietnam?
- > Why did President Clinton need McCain's support for this effort?

### Clip 4: Getting Into Politics

This clip shares how McCain found his way into politics following the war. You may want to review the term “carpetbagger” with your students. McCain, new to Arizona, was elected to the seat formerly held by Barry Goldwater, the five-term senator often credited with sparking the resurgence of the conservative movement in the 1960s.

- > What was unique about McCain's style of campaigning?
- > How did McCain present himself to the voters in Arizona?



### Clip 5: Presidential Run

In 2000, McCain ran against George W. Bush for the Republican presidential nomination. As the underdog, McCain had to bring his diligent work ethic to campaigning. It may be helpful to review with the students the order of state primaries and caucuses: New Hampshire, Nevada, South Carolina. This clip highlights McCain's upset in New Hampshire, and how the threatened Bush campaign raised the stakes by the time the vote reached South Carolina. This clip is a great way to introduce the concept of "dirty campaigning." Share some recent examples or ask the students to find some on YouTube on their own. Analyze the music, tone, images, and messaging of "positive" and "negative" political advertising.

- Why was the Straight Talk Express an important campaign strategy?
- What are "retail" politics?
- How did McCain's pledge to run an honorable campaign ultimately contribute to his loss?



### Clip 6: The Confederate Flag

Students will likely be familiar with the ongoing debate regarding Confederate Civil War memorials and statues. One of the original and most salient examples of this debate has been around the display of the Confederate flag, which had flown over the South Carolina State House in Columbia since 1961. The flag, like most symbols and statues of the Confederacy, was in response to, and defiance of, the civil rights movement. Defenders of the flag call it a symbol of heritage, while those in opposition find that term to be a thinly veiled justification to memorialize the southern states' history of slavery and segregation. This clip demonstrates the significance of the issue of the flag in the 2000 presidential election, the McCain campaign's initial strategy to respond to the controversy, and his eventual personal retraction.

- Why would McCain's campaign officials recommend that he establish his position as a states' rights issue?
- How did this position privilege optics over instinct?
- How does McCain's decision to return to South Carolina to make a public apology comment on his character?
- Do you feel McCain's apology excuses or forgives his initial position which was inauthentic, and some might argue, unethical?





### Clip 7: Healthcare Bill

This excerpt of the film features a momentous vote on the Senate floor. It's helpful for the students to have some background on the Affordable Care Act (ACA), better known as "Obamacare." The ACA was signed into law in March 2010, extending health insurance coverage to millions of uninsured Americans. The Act expanded Medicaid eligibility, created a Health Insurance Marketplace, and prevented insurance companies from denying coverage due to pre-existing conditions. On Jan. 20, 2017, in his first executive order, President Donald Trump directed executive agency heads to "delay the implementation of any provision or requirement of the Act that would impose a fiscal burden on any State." This order was the first phase of Trump's efforts to repeal and replace the ACA, one of his central campaign promises. Congress took on the responsibility of replacing the ACA. While votes were almost entirely down party lines, this clip shows McCain's dramatic post-surgery appearance and speech on the Senate floor.

- > What does McCain mean by "top-down legislation"?
- > How does McCain's commitment to "regular order" reflect his principles?
- > Is McCain's vote significant or just symbolic?

**"We all have the one virtue we aspire to most. For McCain, it's courage. He admires it 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."**

— DAVID BROOKS



# ACTIVITIES



## Acts of Civility

John McCain's family continues to passionately preserve his legacy, and one of their efforts was #ActsofCivility, an invitation to embody McCain's values and principles. Challenge your students to take even the smallest of steps from that initiative:

- Engage with a friend or family member with whom you don't see eye-to-eye.
- Learn about and try to see an issue from a new perspective.
- Pledge to listen before responding to a viewpoint different from your own.
- Find an issue on which to agree with someone with whom you frequently disagree.
- Express your appreciation for someone else's service, particularly public service.
- Give back through an act of community service.

*[Inspired by [johnmccain.com](http://johnmccain.com).]*

In addition to hearing the students' experiences with these efforts, search the hashtag #ActsofCivility on social media and see how contemporary public figures and ordinary citizens have honored McCain's legacy.

## Op-Ed

Take a contemporary contentious issue such as abortion rights, healthcare, executive power, or voting rights. Ask the students to write an op-ed or persuasive essay, taking a particular stance on the issue, from the point of view of John McCain. They will need to first do additional research on McCain's position on certain issues, and then use their understanding of his values to inform and articulate their opinion.

## In the Arena

John McCain's legacy lives on in many places, including the McCain Institute for International Leadership at Arizona State University, which, inspired by the senator's leadership and his family's legacy of public service, advances character-driven leadership based on security, economic opportunity, freedom, and human dignity around the world. One of the institute's many efforts is a podcast series called "[In the Arena](#)." The podcast features conversations with public servants, journalists, human rights defenders, and others. Listen to an episode as a class, or assign the students an episode for homework and discuss how the issue connects to McCain's legacy and service.



# JOHN McCAIN

## FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

This Engagement Guide was developed and written by Kunhardt Film Foundation, 2020.

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