

John McCain known as a man of quiet faith

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Sen. John McCain, a former prisoner of war who embraced patriotism loudly and religion quietly, died Aug. 25 at age 81.

He was diagnosed in July 2017 with glioblastoma, an aggressive form of brain cancer.

The longtime Arizona Republican senator, reared in the Episcopal Church, attended a Southern Baptist megachurch—North Phoenix Baptist Church—in his later years.

He viewed himself as a Christian but had “a distrust of the Religious Right and a faith that is too public, too political,” said Stephen Mansfield, author of books about the faiths of presidents and presidential candidates, in an interview last December.

‘Saved and forgiven’

During McCain’s runs for president, especially his second campaign in 2008, he spoke about his faith. But, even then, he tended to tell a story about a silent expression of belief in God.



Candidates Sen. John McCain (left) and Sen. Barack Obama (right) joined Saddleback Church Pastor Rick Warren on stage during a presidential forum held at the church. (BP File Photo by Meredith Day)

In a family memoir and a campaign ad, as well as a televised interview with Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in Southern California, McCain recalled a guard in his prisoner of war camp in Vietnam who shared his faith one Christmas.

“He stood there for a minute, and with his sandal on the dirt in the courtyard, he drew a cross and he stood there,” McCain told Warren at the Saddleback Civil Forum. “And a minute later, he rubbed it out, and walked away. For a minute there, there were just two Christians worshipping together.”

Asked by Warren what being a Christian means, McCain simply replied: “It means I’m saved and forgiven.”

At the time of his presidential campaign, McCain biographer Paul Alexander said the senator’s military and faith backgrounds were responsible for his religious reserve.

“He’s a very spiritual person but ... in his core, he’s a military man,” said Alexander, author of *Man of the People: The Maverick Life and Career of John McCain*. “They don’t feel comfortable talking about religion.”

Prayed ‘more often and more fervently’

During more than five years in a POW camp in Vietnam, McCain drew on his Episcopal roots—his great-grandfather was an Episcopal minister, and McCain attended Episcopal day and boarding schools.

In his family memoir, *Faith of My Fathers*, he recounted how he “prayed more often and more fervently than I ever had as a free man.”

George “Bud” Day, a fellow POW, said McCain was among those who volunteered to preach at religious services the prisoners eventually were permitted to hold at the prison known as the “Hanoi Hilton.”

“He was a very good preacher, much to my surprise,” Day said in 2008, when he was 83. “He could remember all of the liturgy from the Episcopal services ... word for word.”

Day died in 2013, and McCain spoke at his funeral.

One Christmas in captivity, McCain recalled in the memoir, as “room chaplain” he was given a few minutes to copy passages from a Bible. Then, in between hymns sung with emotion by his comrades, he read portions of the story of the birth of Christ.

“It was more sacred to me than any service I had attended in the past, or any service I have attended since,” he wrote.

In recent years, McCain sometimes spoke in person and online of his reliance on prayer. He tweeted about praying for people who were victims of tragedies, from a church in Sutherland Springs to the tourist attractions

of New York City.

Kept distance from Religious Right

“Prayer was the most important thing for him when he was a POW, and he often mentions prayer in times of national crisis,” Mansfield said. “Otherwise, he’s been cautious about mentioning it very publicly, because he does not want to be identified with the Religious Right or some of the more religious politicians he despises.”

McCain’s differences with some conservative Christians were displayed prominently in the 2000 campaign when he called Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell “agents of intolerance,” remarks for which he later apologized.

In a conciliatory move, McCain spoke at the 2006 commencement at Falwell’s Liberty University and, in an even greater outreach to the Religious Right, he chose then-Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, an anti-abortion evangelical, as his 2008 running mate.

He made an immediate defense of then-Sen. Barack Obama when a woman at a 2008 campaign appearance expressed her lack of trust in the Democratic candidate because she believed he was “an Arab.” McCain corrected her and said Obama was a “decent, family man.”

“For a few moments in his own campaign stop, he defended his opponent,” Mansfield recalled in a January 2018 interview. “He, like Reagan, has no problem speaking kindly of the other side and in personal terms.”

Paul Kengor, a political scientist at Grove City College in Pennsylvania, said a story about McCain’s family life demonstrated to him McCain’s Christian character.

His wife, Cindy, unexpectedly adopted a child with a cleft palate from an orphanage run by Mother Teresa in Bangladesh in 1991. He first learned of

her decision when she arrived at the airport with the child, *The Telegraph* reported.

Kengor, author of books on the faith of politicians, said: “Some people talk the faith and some people walk the faith. That story struck me as an impressive example of a Christian living the faith. Yes, it was Cindy’s bold initiative, but John McCain accepted it and became a father to that girl—by all accounts, a loving father.”