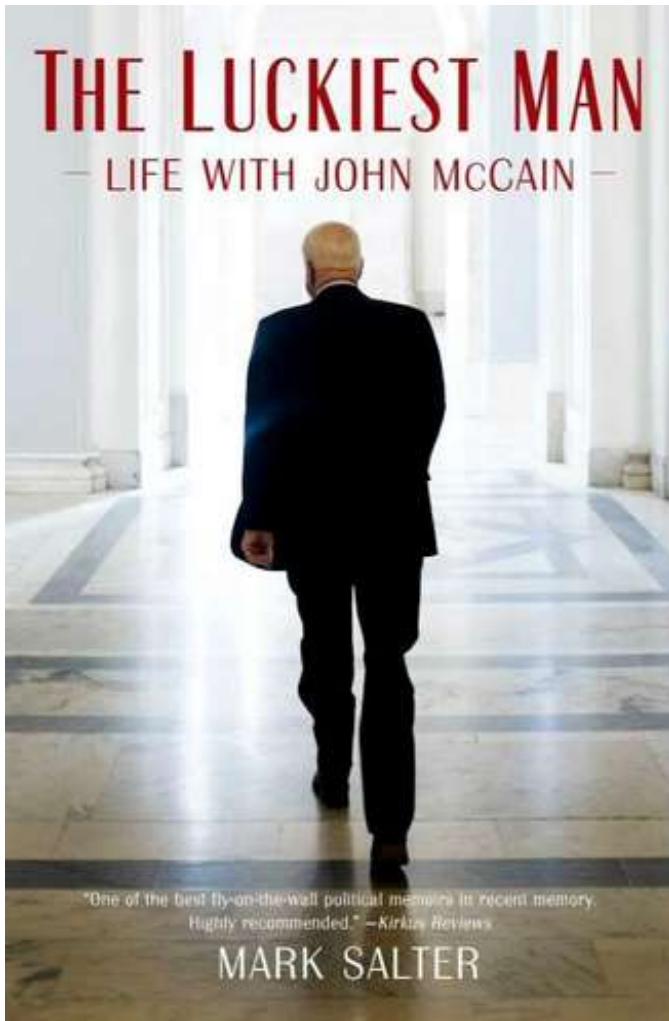


A FASCINATING LIFE

Friendship spanned the better part of two decades

Posted: Sunday, October 25, 2020

"The Luckiest Man: Life With John McCain" by Mark Salter. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020, 608 pages, \$35 (hardcover).



“He was a fascinating character to study at close quarters, capable right until the end of surprising you with qualities you hadn’t thought could fit compatibly in one personality,” Mark Salter notes near the beginning of *“The Luckiest Man: Life With John McCain,”* his new memoir describing what it was like to work with one of the true icons of our era. “He was a great bunch of guys, staffers used to joke. He was romantic and cynical, hopeful and fatalistic.”

“Having seen humanity at its best and worst in the same experience, he expected to see good and evil in every conflict, martial and political,” the author continues. “He believed there were always, in every fight, good guys fighting bad guys on behalf of little guys. But his romanticism didn’t ignore reality. He saw the gray between the white of his convictions and the black of their antitheses. He was worldly, widely traveled, well informed, pragmatic, and familiar with all kinds of actors in all kinds of conflicts.”

Without a doubt, *“The Luckiest Man”* is one of the most inspiring books I have ever had occasion to read. Like most folks, I was familiar with the basics of McCain’s life

trajectory – from his imprisonment in North Vietnam during the 1960s to his ultimate emergence as a force to be reckoned with well into the current century. He was a complicated individual motivated by an intricate set of unique circumstances. He was also everyman; I finished the manuscript with the distinct feeling that if he could overcome what he had to face during his life, then there are no excuses for the rest of us when it comes to the influence we can have on others during our relatively brief tenure on this planet.

“The Luckiest Man” consists of a prologue, 13 chapters and an epilogue. The tome – and clocking in at 608 pages it definitely qualifies for that distinction – is extensively researched and also includes 16 pages of photographs that serve to bring the manuscript to life in a way that would have not been possible otherwise. I actually spent almost an hour reflecting on the various snapshots from McCain’s life and contemplating how they amplified and reinforced the significance of his achievements in an extraordinarily visceral way.

For Salter, it is obvious this was more than just an attempt to capture the essence of a great man; it is also the story of his relationship with McCain – a friendship that spanned the better part of two decades. It succinctly chronicles the profound impact the senator had on his life (and to some extent, vice versa). Woven throughout the narrative is the mutual respect each had for the other, manifest by the author in a number of ways both readily apparent and much more subtle. We learn how they met, why their alliance was able to weather the immense pressures endemic to the world in which they operated, and how they collaborated to bring to life the vision both had for the direction they felt would be best for America.

As is typically the case with anything of a biographical nature, it was the insights into the main character's personality and style that piqued my interest the most – and Salter poured those on liberally throughout his prose. Witness the following from “Straight Talk Express,” the sixth chapter and one of my personal favorites: “McCain got to know everyone under his command, officer and enlisted, teasing them, barking at them, encouraging them, delegating to them, and inspiring them, Carl Smith and other pilots recalled. He was congenial but direct. He told them what he expected from them and held them to account. He met with the heads of the maintenance departments, asked what they needed, and instructed them to put together a schedule for the repairs to get the grounded planes in the air. ‘He got them fired up or he fired them,’ Smith said.”

Salter, who served on McCain's staff for 18 years, collaborated with the senator on seven books, “The Restless Wave,” “Faith of My Fathers,” “Worth the Fighting For,” “Why Courage Matters,” “Character Is Destiny,” “Hard Call” and “Thirteen Soldiers.” A free spirit, he eschewed college after high school to take a job with the railroad while playing in a band. He began his political career as a speech writer for U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane J. Kirkpatrick.

Although the book does mention his life as a young man, his distinguished military career and the pivotal sequence of events that transformed him into the John McCain most of us became intimately familiar with over the last decade or so, the main focus of “The Luckiest Man” is on his relationships with his colleagues in Congress and how he navigated the often-turbulent waters that still characterize the still-evolving political landscape in this country. Among the many topics dissected in some detail are his antagonistic relationship with Donald Trump (which began well before he became president), the decision-making that led to his selection of Sarah Palin as his running mate in 2008, the core principles that guided much of his legislative agenda, and a deep dive into his deepest-held views of life, honor and redemption – views that ultimately shaped how he faced the cancer diagnosis that eventually took his life.

Speaking of that final episode, I was particularly moved by Salter's description of the moment he passed away in August 2018: “The end came the next afternoon. We had wheeled his bed onto the deck outside his bedroom and pointed him toward the creek he loved. He was surrounded by loved ones as the intervals between his breaths grew longer. Just before 4:30 p.m., one of the black hawks flew over his bed to the other side of the creek, settled on a sycamore limb and looked down on the scene. He never drew another breath. The music playlist Cindy had made for him, an eclectic mix of his favorite pop songs and jazz standards, was running. A moment after he passed, the mourners heard Sinatra's voice singing ‘My Way.’”

Regardless of your political persuasion, if you are interested in learning more about the proverbial life well-lived, I believe you would find “The Luckiest Man” to be a fascinating excursion. I learned a lot about what the man did. I learned even more about who he was. Highly recommended.

– *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.*