

Martha McSally's Humiliation, and the Republican Party's *Francis Wilkinson*

(Bloomberg Opinion) -- If the degradation of the Republican Party were cast as a morality tale, the lead character might be Senator Martha McSally of Arizona. To say that McSally was once impressive undersells her biography. To say she is now humiliated undersells her shame.



Photographer: Caitlin O'Hara/Getty Images North America PRESCOTT, AZ - OCTOBER 19: U.S. President Donald Trump watches as Senator Martha McSally (R-AZ) speaks at a Make America Great Again campaign rally on October 19, 2020 in Prescott, Arizona. With almost two weeks to go before the November election, President Trump is back on the campaign trail with multiple daily events as he continues to campaign against Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden. (Photo by Caitlin O'Hara/Getty Images)

In the highly likely event that McSally is defeated tomorrow by her Democratic opponent, former astronaut Mark Kelly, her electoral defeat will be an anticlimax. McSally had been sinking since the toxic dawn of Donald Trump's presidency, but she hit bottom last week when she publicly debased herself before a man who could never equal her own service and accomplishments.

McSally served in the Air Force for two decades, leaving the service in 2010 as a colonel, and was the first woman to fly combat missions and command a fighter squadron. She was gutsy on the ground as well, at one point suing the Department of Defense over a policy that required servicewomen stationed in Saudi Arabia to cover themselves in an abaya outside military bases.

In addition to her degree in biology from the Air Force Academy, McSally has a master's in public policy from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. She was elected to the House of Representatives in 2014, serving two terms before

losing a Senate race to Democrat Kyrsten Sinema. In 2018, Governor Doug Ducey appointed her to fill the seat of John McCain after his death. On Tuesday, she faces voters in a special election to fill the two years remaining in her term.

In 2016, McSally, like many in her party, could still read a moral compass. She made it clear that she would not endorse Trump. She regarded his Russia-friendly attacks on NATO with skepticism. She expressed concern about the contempt with which Trump spoke of “veterans and Hispanics and women and others. That’s just not how leaders carry themselves.” When the “Access Hollywood” tape was made public in October, McSally responded on Twitter: “Trump’s comments are disgusting. Joking about sexual assault is unacceptable. I’m appalled.”

That was then. By 2020, McSally was supporting Trump’s position 90% of the time. She voted to exclude witnesses and evidence in Trump’s impeachment trial. She highlighted, for cheap applause from the MAGA crowd, her Trumpy assault on a respected journalist with a long track record of level-headed integrity.

Then, last Wednesday, the woman who fought her way to respect as a leader of men in the Air Force, who demanded respect for women in Saudi Arabia, and who respected herself too much in 2016 to endorse Donald Trump, appeared at a rally with the president in Goodyear, Arizona. Trump, having concluded that McSally is insufficiently popular to boost him in the state, didn’t even bother feigning respect; he treated McSally like, well, a dog.

“Martha, just come up fast. Fast. Fast,” Trump called, deploying his hand in rapid motion to emphasize just how quickly she should heel. “Come on. Quick. You got one minute! One minute, Martha! They don’t want to hear this, Martha. Come on. Let’s go. Quick, quick, quick. Come on. Let’s go.”

It was a grotesque performance, even by Trump’s standards. McSally made it worse. “I’m coming!” she said. “Thank you, President Trump!”

McSally has spoken publicly of being sexually abused by a high school coach. Her suit in Saudi Arabia specifically objected to women being subservient to men. Yet with her political career on the line, she proved no different than most of her fellow Republicans in her willingness to accept personal and public humiliation from the president of the United States.

It may be too late for the colonel and senator to reclaim her lost dignity. The rest of the country still has one last shot.

****This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.*

****Francis Wilkinson writes about U.S. politics and domestic policy for Bloomberg Opinion. He was previously executive editor of the Week, a writer for Rolling Stone, a communications consultant and a political media strategist.*