**Interview of late Senator John McCain by Brian Lamb. The topic was “Vietnam: Fifty Years later.” The interview was held on October 18, 2017. The videorecording is available on the C-SPAN website:**

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?435879-1/senator-john-mccain-reflects-vietnam-war-experience>

Participants: Brian Lamb (interviewer) is “BL.” Senator McCain is “JMC.” Length of pauses is approximate.

00:35 seconds

BL: Senator McCain, when- (0.2) .h you look back fifty years ago on when your plane went down there in Hanoi?, (0.5) tch and- through thuh last fifty years what! toda:y, in your opinion, .h uh- are thuh legaci:es:? of Vietnam. (0.2) good and bad

 (0.2)

00:00:44

JMC: thuh legacies of Vietnam is that we: before we get into aye conflict, we’d better have uh strategy:, and uh capability to win. (0.2) .h and was- this was one of these gra:dual drip, drip, drip involvements. started out with thuh- .hh uh thing called thuh Gulf of Tonkein resolution where there was suppo:sedly and it is still! not clear to this day, .hh confrontation between between Vietnamese ship and (0.2) .h or ships and American ships, which then led to uh resolution (0.2) .h rammed through by Lyndon Johnson to .h aye- aye- aye comple:te! lack of focus (0.2) and strategy on how to bring it to uh close! .h and I’m very sympathetic! (0.3) because thuh one thing that overro:de .h most of Lyndon Johnson's thinking?, (0.2) appropriately, .h was (.) China! (0.4) that we certainly! didn't want to have aye confrontation and uh conflagration!, (0.2) .h that would lead to aye- uh real conflict there. so: .h it cautioned a:ll of our actions!, .h SO: that .h (0.2) it was aye ve:ry gra:dual escalation:, which then? (0.2) uh- not only didn't harm! thee enemy, but it strengthened their resolve! a:nd (0.3) .h u::h that led, of course, to: .h all kinds of implications and repercussions thu:h .h thuh new age, thu:h t- use of drugs, demonstrations, right out here on this mall there was .h uh million people or however many it was that- .h it really split our society in uh way that uh .h (0.2) that we u::h uh sometimes forget! (0.2) mass arrests?, demonstrations Chicago uh .h tch=that all of us can look back and see on c spa=hunh=n eh hunh hunh! but it it was uh tumultuous ti:me?, and most of it was bred by .hh thuh conflict. and one aspect of thuh conflict by thuh way that I will never ever (0.3) countenance (0.2) .h is that we drafted (0.3) .h thuh lowest income level of America and thuh highest income level .h found uh doctor that would say that they had uh bone spur. (0.2) .h that is wro:ng. that is wro:ng! if we’re going to ask every American .h to serve, every American should serve. and late! later in thuh war we went to thuh lottery system which was .h but for years and years, it was thuh lowest income Americans, .h which means uh lot of minorities!, .h tch that were forced to go and fight. and that’s (0.2) .h that that that to me: that is uh black mark on .h thuh history of this country, a:sking those with thuh lowest income level to do thuh fighting for us while thuh .h wealthiest stayed home.

 (0.2)

00:03:27

BL: tch .h when you were in your (0.2) I believe Aye four?

 (0.2)

JMC: Yes

 (0.2)

BL: taking off from (forestall) thuh carrier,

 (0.2)

JMC: Yeah

 (0.5)

BL: how apprehensive were you? when you were flying into uh plac:e like northern Vietnam that you’d get shot down.

00:03:40

 (0.2)

JMC: .h well=I- I was onboard thee u ess ess forestall where we had uh horrific fire and I was hit by uh missile and all of that uh my plane was and .h uh on thuh flight deck. and then I transferred over to thee uu ess ess arizkoni, I was flying off thee

 ariz[koni ]

BL: [( ] for that yeah)

JMC: another carrier when I was shot down. What was I thinking? I was uh young fighter pilot! (I [was) ]

BL: [how (old)] were you?

 (0.2)

JMC: u:h twenty: (0.8) eight?, something like that?, e:h listen that is what I wanted to do with my life! I wanted to go to combat! I wanted to .h (0.2) go against thee enemy! and it- and it wasn't so much that they were thee enemy as that as that- you know that is what I was trained to do! all those years. a:nd I wanted to do it! it wasn't as if I was .h o:h no:, I don't want to have to fly this combat mission. .h it was that I’m ready to go! (0.2) and my contemporaries and my- squadron mates were thuh same way. (0.2) and we took uh lot of losses. but- (0.2) .h one of thuh great things about being uh fighter pilot is you are sure that everybody else is going to get sh- shot down, but not you. unh hunh henh henh henh

00:04:45

BL: and- when that happened, how many Vietnamese were around you in thuh water in (that) lake?

 (0.2)

00: 04:48

JMC: well when I first went i:n uh thu:h eh- it it’s uh long story, but I was .h barely able to get back to thuh surface. but the:n uh bunch of ‘em jumped in. .h a:nd uh there's uh picture which I am sure you’ll show! .h of them pulling me out out of thuh (0.2) out of thuh lake. .h you can see my a:rm is broken. and up high, and then of course once they pulled me OUT?, they weren't very happy to see me (unh hunh henh [henh)]

BL: [why ] not

 (0.2)

JMC: because I had just finished bombing thuh place. (heh heh heh [heh heh ]

BL: [(heh heh)] ((camera not on BL here))

JMC: and uh so that it got pretty rough. they broke my shoulde:r, a:nd thuh uh k- uh hurt my (0.4) .hh knee again and uhm but- look- I don't blame them! (0.4) I don't blame them! we were in uh war! I don't- (0.2) didn’t like it, but (0.2) .h at thuh same ti:me?, .h u::h duh- when you are in uh war?, and you are captured by thee enemy, .h you can't expect! uh (heh)=you kno=heh=w to have you know to have tea?, henh! and so they pulled me out of thuh- they long story short, (they) pulled me out of thuh lake, put me in thuh tru- beat me up uh little an’ then or uh lot, and then went to thee (0.2) .h now famous Hanoi Hilton! prison, which was just uh short drive! away. five minute drive away .h and then chuh it’s uh very long story about how they .hh found out who my father was, and they decided to give me: treatment, a:nd two- wonderful Americans they moved me into finally .h who thought that they had moved me in to die!, .h u:h and they took care of me and nursed me back to health!, and then .h after they saw me: in- better health, they put me into (.) solitary confinement. .h and look!, I don't ho:ld aye grudge against thuh- north Vietnamese. eh- I don't like them?, .h there are some that I would never want to see again?, (0.2) but at thuh same time?, I was part of uh conflict. okay? and .h I thought they were uh (0.2) some of thuh- meanest people I have ever met in my life!, and I never want to see again. .h but there were several that- that- that were good people! (0.4) and that were- kind to me. so .hh that’s why it was much ea:sier for me to s- .h to support along with President Clinton and others! thuh normalization of relations with our two countries to he:al thuh wounds of war.

 (0.1)

00:07:18

BL: .h when you got back from over there, how much did you and your dad talk about it?

00:07:21

 (0.4)

JMC: uh lot! (0.2) uh lot! (0.2) .h it was very hard on my dad, particularly (0.4) .h since I knew what was happening to me and he didn't. and so: .h >everybody that would come through< Hawaii in his command would want to talk about me. and .h hh they did thuh right thing. they said, please just don't talk about (0.4) Admiral McCain's son. becaus:e then that- takes up thuh whole conversation but (0.1) .h every christmas (0.4) uh for four years, (0.2) he would fly: all thuh way up to thuh dee em zee, thuh- .h thuh- dividing line between north and south Vietnam, and have christmas dinner with thuh marines, and uh .h and then- of course, and remember! that these (0.2) marines, theh- and soldiers they were draftees! they weren’t there becau=heh=se they volunteered! .h and uh they’re mainly ei- were eighteen and nineteen year old kids. .h uh it- it’s just I’ve seen those pictures, they’re just- beautiful. and (eh) .h he would come back (0.4) very happy and restored from .hh from .h from that experience. and- so- (0.5) ih- it was ve:ry (0.5) .h he was very cognizant of thuh fact that- thuh north Vietnamese we:re (0.4) .h u::h valued my (0.3) .h my presence. and as you know, there were so many stories we could tell, but .h they offered me uh chance to be released, (0.2) .h but our code of conduct! says: sick and injured and by order of capture. (0.2) and I knew why they were offering me release! if my name had been smith .h it wouldn’t of and so but saying no was aye uh tch ih wasn't thee easiest uh thing to say. .h and I don't mean to bounce around, but three years afterwards, after I had refused, .h on christmas eve?, cold christmas eve in Hanoi, .h they ha- every- I was in solitary confinement. every cell had uh- .h loudspeaker! in it. and they were playing (0.2) christmas music. enh henh hunh! I I I still remember that uh (0.2) I still remember that uh .h one of thuh songs was "I'll be home for christmas." henh! sung by Dinah Shore, that! was uh bit nostalgic. but anyway, (0.2) .h theh- thuh sa:me guy who was (th’) leader of all thuh camps came into my cell. .h and to make uh very long story short, .h u:h he told me about an island that Ho Chi Minh .h u:h used to love to go to, which many years later I demanded uh visit to henh and we=heh=nt to! .h uh but most importantly, tch at thee end of thuh evening, he it was- it was- pu:rely social. (0.2) it’s thee only time it was ever done .h and he was giving me cigarettes and he was telling me about like Ho Chi Minh’s island and how his fa:ther had been part of thuh Viet minh and all of that. >but anyway< make uh long story short he said- you know there's an i:sland that Ho Chi Minh .h uses to rest, relax, refresh, and it’s out in thuh Tomkin Gulf! and .h he said my father! has gone out there with .h with Ho Chi Minh!, but nobody knows about it. I said really! .h years later normalization of relations thuh foreign minister of Vietnam comes to Washington, I have him to lunch in thuh senate dining room .h and he says whate:ver you want whatever you want we’ll do because you’re our friend now okay and I said, I want to go to Ho Chi Minh’s island! heh heh he and he sa=heh=id how do you how do you know about Ho Chi Minh’s island! no one knows about Ho Chi Minh’s island! I said I: know about Ho Chi Minh island. so, (but/’bout) six months later .h Mark Salter and I and Cindy! go to Hai Phong and get on thuh boat and go out spent thuh night .h looking at thuh sunset from thuh balcony of Ho Chi Minh's bedroom. heh hah hah! amazing story!=

BL: =how big eh- island was it [or is it]

JMC: [eh ] ah it was not not rea:l big but not small. in other words, (0.6) .h I would say, (0.3) u::h h so=that- (0.2) you could probably walk from end to end of it in .h (uh) half hour. (0.2) you know it was .h so any way we spent thuh- we spent thuh night there. tch and so .h u:h he he ca- as I say, he came to Washington and .h he has since passed away. he was he was thee interpreter?, .h for Dong Chow Ping uh ex- excuse me uh uh tch uh huh=

BL: =Fan Man Dong?=

JMC: =yeah! (0.2) no no (0.3) for uh (0.4) cuh- (0.4) uh when he-

00:11:49

BL: in in Paris or u::h?=

JMC: =Paris peace talks?

00:12:01

 (0.4)

JMC: I have aye (0.2) on my wa:ll uh in thuh my office .h there is aye ca:ble (0.3) that was sent by Averil Harriman (0.2) to: u:h back to thuh state department, (0.2) classified, secret, .h and it says! on it (0.2) u:h at thuh tea! break? le duc toh that’s who it was Lee Duc Toh was thee .h north Vietnamese negotiator at thuh tea! break, (0.2) Le Duc (Toh/Pho) said that thuh Vietnamese had inte:nded to release thee Admiral McCain's son, but he had refused. .h and that’s thuh (0.2) that was part of thee: .h documents that we declassified because for uh while there everybody was believing that we had left Americans behind. .hh so (0.2) uhm tch one of thuh- (0.2) they- such long stories but (0.3) u:h Senator Mitchell and Senator Dole set up this select committee headed by me and John Kerry .h a:nd part of thuh deal was that thee conspiracy theory people said .h there’s all these secret documents! tch that are out there that would prove! that we left Americans behind! .h so part of thuh- (0.2) re- our repo:rt is we said that everyone everything has to be declassified that has anything to do with pee oh double u’s and em eye ayes. well one of thuh documents that came out was thuh one .h that I mentioned to you. it was from Averil Harriman?, .h in Paris?, back to .h back to thuh state department! and (0.2) .h that- was really remarkable. when it came to- thousands! of documents came out. (0.2) and, that one was .h more than interesting.

 (.1)

00:13:37

BL: .h leh- let me ask you about- (0.3) we’re going [through uh period]

00:13:44

JMC: [sorry for thuh ] long answers.

00:13:45

BL: no! that's fine. we're going through (0.3) uh period uh- where we see uh lot of hate speech?

 (0.2)

JMC: yeah yeah

BL: now I want to a:sk you. this may be sensitive but I want to a:sk you, (0.6) you- you came out of thuh Vietnam war and you say, I am not bitter. (0.2) I didn’t have nightmares. (0.2) I got over it. .h (0.4) reLATE that to what our president said about you.

 (0.2)

JMC: .h well

BL: when he said "you are no war hero," what did that what would that feel like? and here's uh guy that .h had like five deferments. and [all that ] how do you process that.

JMC: [((laughs))]

00:14:20

 (0.1)

JMC: I think you just ignore it. I really do. (0.2) .h I watch what thuh president does, not what tuh he he says. I think thee important thing about that statement though .h was not about me. (0.4) .h I went out not that long ago, f- after he said that, (0.2) .h because occasionally?, .h people come to us their- relative (0.2) served (0.2) in uh war and didn’t get thuh medals that they earned. and we (0.2) do: thuh research and anyway (0.2) uh ninety two year old man .h from uh (0.2) uh Scottsdale, Arizona?, (0.3) .h uh prisoner of war in: in Germany (0.2) weighed uh hundred an’ ten pounds when he was finally .h when thuh Germans finally were u:h stopped fighting. tch and (0.5) so we gave him his his medals! and it was wonderful. every- at uh retirement home. a:ll of them were there. it was ve:ry moving. (0.2) .h and I was talking to ‘im >before it< and he said, .h Senator McCain tell me why is it that Donald Trump doesn’t like me? (0.2) .h and I said, sir uh he does. (0.2) and so do all Americans. .h so it wasn’t what he said about me:!? because I’m in thee arena. (0.2) but what he said like that ninety two year old man?, .h who came out of uh stalag! weighing uh hundred and ten pounds! that’s what that’s what I take exception to.

00: 15:51

BL: .hh how much of this hate speech we see in in thuh society, thuh drugs and you mentioned this earlier came+ out+ of+ uh period in our existence (0.2) fifty years ago today uhm=

JMC: =yeah=

BL: =when you were shot down where (0.5) thuh government wasn’t telling us thuh truth?

00:16:04

 (0.2)

JMC: .h thuh government wasn’t telling us thuh truth. thuh thee uh whole MacNamara .h up- apparatus was u:h they- they had this idea about quote unquote grad- graduated escalation. that if we just stepped up thuh bombing uh little more .h it would drive ‘em to thuh negotiating table and we would come to aye .h peaceful end! well what actually was happening .h was that it was pumping up! thuh morale of thuh north Vietnamese because they thought they were beatin’ us. I mean look! we were able to to fight back from thee aggressors! and so thuh who:le concept .h was fa:tally flawed! (0.2) and (0.2) to pro:ve! that point was when (0.2) .h u:h thuh talks in (.) h Paris had broken down?, .h so finally Richard Nixon said, okay!, go in wipe ‘em out! (0.2) and we went in with bee fifty twos .h uh and other (0.3) aircraft and just took out all resistance. guess what? .h they uh- agreed to negotiate. so! .h u:h (0.2) thuh problem! (0.2) I think (0.4) had uh lot to do: (0.2) with aye (0.5) belief that somehow you can convince thee enemy (0.2) to: compromise when thee enemy does not think that they are being beaten! (0.4) .h and of course thuh Tet offensive?, and there is so much we could talk about but, .h it was so: mu:ch morale!, boost and thuh Chinese and thuh Russians?, .h were- giving them everything they wanted. .h I mean, .h still thuh most heavily defended place in thuh history of thuh world was Hanoi with=thuh- Russian, surface to air missiles. .h and most people aren’t going to believe this, (0.2) .h but uh Russian ship! would show up in Hi Phong harbor, .h be off loaded theh- thuh missiles be off loaded onto uh vehicle, taken up, put in place, and while we watched it. we watched it! (0.2) and then those missiles were fired .h at American aircraft u:h that’s that’s just- (0.2) I mean (it’s/that’s) worse than ridiculous! thuh first target I had when I when I was uh in combat had already been bombed twelve times. (0.4) it was uh rubble! it was uh pile of rubble! so I went in and bombed thuh rubble again. and .h right not far away from it was uh bridge that we didn’t was not on thuh quote approved list! that’s that’s not thuh way to fight uh war.

00:18:25

 (0.1)

BL: .h I was watching uh tape of uh Viet- north Vietnamese, u:h (0.2) former head of one of that (maybe thuh) (wall low) prison, (who) said that you weren’t tortured.

00:18:33

JMC: unhh! henh henh henh .hh no, I was I was treated like uh king. I was .h thuh featherbed had some lumps in it that I: would like [ to ]

00:18:39

BL: [well] what about thuh difference they say you were not tortured and we’ve told (0.2) people that we have not tortured. and I know you have been against thee idea. .h so what is it why is it so hard for government to tell thuh truth?

00:18:54

 (0.2)

JMC: well! I mean it is uh classic communist u:h you know I mean (0.2) what do you think? that they would say yes, we .h beat him up? we broke his a:rm again?, we did u:h (heh) no=

00:19:04

BL: =(but) we don't do it either. we don't tell thuh truth in that.

 (0.4)

00:19:08

JMC: No and that is one of thuh problems that I have had for uh lo:ng time now. is what our treatment of detainees. particularly in thuh use of water boarding. .h that makes us really that is one of our (most/more) embarrassing chapters .h in my view of American history is thuh way .h we treated there is uh story! that tch uh k s m Kalik Sheik Mohammed? (0.2) .h was being water boarded and they- sent uh message back to c i a saying, .h we can’t get anything out of him. and their answer was, water board him some more. (0.2) .h waterboarding?, was deemed aye war crime .h and Japanese (0.2) officers were shot and executed because they water boarded people. it is clearly aye war crime. .h a:nd uh, .h uh- there- by thuh way, thuh c i a has gotten away with it. they’ve destro:yed thuh- film. they’ve destroyed thuh uh lot of thee information and it would be uh black mark on thuh history .h of this country (0.2) that we did that. tch a:nd (0.2) uh frankly, I’ll never forgive thuh c i a for: .h what they did.

00:20:12

 (0.1)

BL: .h go back to wh- thuh comparison on something, you- you we know uh lot about your torture?

 (0.2)

JMC: yeah

 (0.2)

BL: what has been harder for you?, (0.3) living through thuh torture, or living through thuh cancer

00:20:25

 (0.5)

JMC: well, I think, (0.2) you know, theh- living through cancer is aye (0.4) is uh challenge that that I ha:ve. .h living through torture? is you never know what is going to happen nex- thuh next uh morning! whether they're going to come around and open your cell door and say, .h come on out. so! .h (0.2) at lea:st with this fight that I'm in?, I know thee enemy and I know (0.2) what we have to do! and .h know that- that (0.4) we take thuh consequences. but let me also say, Brian, .h that I have ha:d, we are now talking about fifty years?, I am thuh most fortunate person (0.2) .h of all of thuh thousands that you have interviewed, that you will ever know! I have had thuh best and full life that anybody! could possibly have. .h so (0.2) .h I look at this (0.4) challenge uh as (0.2) with joy!? (0.2) with happiness, and with .h with gratitude. (0.2) gratitude that I have had thee opportunity to serve this country uh little bit.

00:21:27

 (0.2)

BL: .h have you noticed (0.4) any change in thuh way people are approaching you since you've dealt with this latest?

00:21:36

 (0.1)

JMC: yeah. yeah. it has been more sympathetic. .h tch I'm sure that some of ‘em are glad I am going. unh henh henh henh [hunh ]

BL?: [(hinh!)]

00:21:46

JMC: no=heh=I look, I’ve been greeted with uh (0.2) look .h thu:h people (have) told me when I gave thuh speech thee other night and uh hundred senators were in their seats that that’s was thuh first time that’s ever happened. (0.2) so, there has been .h an incre:dible outpouring of friendship. I mean, unbelievable. it moves me to tears.

 (0.3)

00:22:04

BL: what is your treatment now?

 (0.1)

00:22:06

JMC: I receive radiation and chemo and .h I've had it done twice u:h and now I am waiting for an em ar eye. and I want to tell you!, that nobody expected me to have thee energy level and (0.2) thuh I don’t have (0.2) .h any problems sleeping!, I don’t have any problem eating, I am exercising all thuh time, .h I am in fine shape! and so (0.2) let's see what happens! I have fooled ‘em befo=heh=re. (henh henh)

00:23:00

 (0.2)

BL: tch one last hh question about thuh Vietnam legacy [thing ]

JMC: [(yeah)]

 (0.2)

JMC: yeah

 (0.2)

BL: tch what was thee impact (on) (0.2) thuh Vietnam war on our military up to this time?

00:23:03

 (0.2)

JMC: thee impact on our military, of thuh Vietnam war was aye devastating blow. not uh fatal blow (0.2) but aye devastating blow. .h after thuh war was over, thuh chief of staff of thuh united states army came tuh theh armed services committee and said .h senators, you have aye hollow army. (0.2) because .h thee all vol- thee thee thuh mi:litary was ero:ded .h because of drugs!, because of anti-war!, because of thuh inequities of thuh draft!, .h we were in bad shape! and fortunately then, .h if I may be uh bit parochial, Ronald Reagan came along .h with uh commitment to rebuild our military, and we did! and it’s good now. it’s it’s there’s (we have) uh lot of problems right now, but .h thuh fact is, it is not thuh moRAle issue. listen, we had marine .h company officers that were discharging half their company?, (0.2) .h because they were not they weren’t- they weren’t uh performing! they- they we gave them thee authority, just throw them out! if they are not any good. .h and uh, .h there was uh famous u:h (0.2) uh marine general .h uhm who u:h who said uh- thuh thuh uh media guy came up to him and said, look, you’re you have all these guys you are throwing out all these guys out of thuh marine corps, what’s going to be left. he said, see that guy over there? he said he is my driver. if he and I are thuh only two left in thuh marine corps, if that's what it takes, I’m going to fix thuh marine corp. (0.4) so, it was aye ve:ry big uh problem .h uh or challenge! to rebuild our military after what happened uh after thuh Vietnam (0.2) conflict.

((end of recording))