

John McCain's funeral hinted at some trouble the U.S. might face in the future. Most readers might expect me to argue that our country will face trouble because we lost a great bipartisan legislator. Indeed, it is true that the loss of an influential Senator, who was willing to work with the other party, will make it harder for the opposing political parties to reach compromises that might solve some of our country's problems. However, there is a much greater danger looming. To understand the future threat, we must discuss the different roles our president plays.

The leadership of a country's executive branch serves two functions, executing the laws and serving as the symbol of government. Great Britain divides these leadership roles between two people. The Prime Minister leads the executive branch of government and the king or queen serve the symbolic role. In the U.S., the president serves both roles.

In times of crisis, our presidents have been able to rally the whole country, not just members of their respective political parties. Lincoln helped heal the country after the Civil War; FDR helped feed our nation's resolve during both the Great Depression and in the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; George W. Bush provided comfort and leadership to the nation in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. In each of these cases, the nation needed the president to act in an inspiring way as the symbol of government.

John McCain's funeral highlights how President Trump may be unable to inspire our country in a time of crisis. John McCain's funeral featured many speakers from both political parties. While McCain was a republican, Joe Biden and President Obama, both democrats, were invited to speak. In contrast, President Trump was not invited to participate or to even attend the funeral. Usually the president would play his role of the symbol of government and be part of the funeral ceremony eulogizing the life of a prominent senator. President Trump was unable to fill this role. The President's words had alienated McCain and left Trump without enough goodwill to enable him to play the ceremonial role.

Unfortunately, John McCain is not the only person our president has alienated. Many of Trump's political opponents will find themselves so at odds personally with the president that they will be unwilling to listen to him. This will create a big problem in a time of crisis when the president needs to talk to all Americans. As it stands now, a large portion of the country will not listen to Trump and take what he says seriously. In a time of crisis, when the country desperately needs all Americans to listen to the president – the symbol of government, President Trump will be unable to meaningfully talk to a large portion of the nation.

My purpose in writing this column is not to chastise the president for making offensive remarks. To use a cliché, "that is water under the bridge" and cannot be changed. Rather my purpose is to call on President Trump to start treating the people he talks to and about with respect. Once people hear the president acting "Presidential," they will be willing to listen to him in a time of crisis – even if they disagree with him politically. In short, I am asking the president to act in a way that will enable him to be an effective symbol of government – should we ever need him to be one.

Joe McGarrity is a Professor of Economics at UCA. He can be reached at joem@uca.edu.