

VILLAGE VIEW

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Veteran's Day is often raw and rainy, but in spite of inclement weather, parades and services honoring those who served in our armed forces always mark the holiday. Bands play, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts gather to march, and the veterans themselves join in the celebration.

Despite the enthusiasm demonstrated by participating marchers and that of the people watching the parades and enjoying the stirring band music, American attitudes towards war veterans have changed--and not for the better--over the past forty years.

When World War II came to an abrupt halt shortly after atomic bombs were dropped on two Japanese cities in August, 1945, people of this nation heaved a collective sigh of relief and welcomed the "boys" home with open arms and loving hearts.

In June 1944 Congress had passed the G.I. Bill of Rights which accorded veterans of World War II a number of valuable benefits. The entire country supported the Congressional action, and it later developed that aiding the veterans in adjusting to civilian life was a fine investment; the "boys" as a group gave impetus to the biggest business boom the United States has ever witnessed.

Benefits included government loans and grants to finance educational opportunities as well as government-insured low-cost mortgage loans to enable veterans to buy homes. Returning servicemen, by the hundreds of thousands, took full advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights. Men and women who might never have had a chance to acquire more education than they possessed when they joined the army, navy, marines, or air force, enrolled at colleges and universities all across the country. Those institutions constructed veteran's housing to provide shelter for the unprecedented numbers of entering students. Veterans came into their classes with a mature appreciation of the value of education to their own futures.

Many were married; some had small children. Provisions were made to help them support (at a minimum subsistence level) their dependents while they prepared themselves for careers.

Two-to-four years later these people were quickly absorbed into the nation's work-force. They bought their homes under the G.I. Bill, paying 4% interest on their mortgages. They bought cars, appliances, home furnishings. Whole new communities sprang up to accommodate the enormous number of young families that created the Baby Boom following close of hostilities.

The economy zoomed. The country thrived. The Gross National Product figures rose into the stratosphere.

Then came the Korean Conflict. Proportionately, a small number of veterans of World War II returned to the armed services to participate. Most of those hundreds of thousands called were raw recruits. And yet, for most Americans, it was a war that didn't hit home. There was no rationing of meat, sugar, or shoes; no wage and price controls were imposed on the American public; Detroit continued producing cars for civilian purposes. While the war was part of our lives, it wasn't an overpowering influence as World War II had been a decade earlier.

Veterans returned from Korea to find themselves eligible for the same benefits accorded those of World War II, and they used their benefits wisely as had their older brothers, but their numbers were smaller, their impact on educational institutions and the economy less notable. They, too, were soon absorbed into the mainstream, and Americans consigned the Korean Conflict to a back burner with surprising alacrity. Few of us are aware that the North and South Koreans have never achieved an armistice and are still at war.

By the time the United States became embroiled in the wars of Southeast Asia, the country's mood had changed. Our participation was unpopular in many circles. No grassroots movement developed among this country's youth to enlist in the services, and the nation's campuses boiled in fervor for Peace, not War. Youth rebelled. No one could convince them they had any duty to defend democracy half-way-around-the-world in Indo-China.

Nonetheless, thousands were drafted; thousands more enlisted in the navy or the air force to avoid being drafted into

the army; and thousands more, who escaped the draft entirely, rampaged, demonstrated, and defied conventions across the board to express their anger.

Not only were they angry about the war, they were angry about every societal or institutional precept. And not only were they angry about fundamental principles, they were angry with their own peers who did not participate in their rebellion. In many instances, their families reflected their anger toward those thousands, whether draftees or enlistees, who went to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. And after those veterans returned, many of the benefits, the prerequisites, and most of the honors traditionally accorded war veterans, were rescinded or withheld.

Some Vietnam War veterans, for instance, claiming physical disabilities as a result of exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliant widely used by our own government in battle zones, were denied. The claims were first declared groundless; more recently, research indicates the chemical may have serious deleterious effects on humans as well as plants. For nearly ten years after our withdrawal from Vietnam, veterans' claims were rejected. Only in recent months have their appeals begun to be recognized as legitimate.

Another example of the pulse of America: during the period of hostilities, servicemen and women were not accorded the automatic respect that was heartily extended to military personnel during World War II. Then, in many cities, public transportation was free to those in uniform, doors of homes and social organizations were flung open in welcome.

But so great was the stigma of soldiering during the Vietnam War that members of the military wore mufti whenever they weren't required to wear their uniforms. Americans disdained recognizable servicemen and women whenever and wherever they appeared.

Yet, we celebrate Veteran's Day. We honor those who answered the call to perform their patriotic duty. We parade with marching bands and flying flags. For those who did not return, the lonely notes of "Taps" echo across village greens, north and south, east and west, throughout the nation.

The sacrifices of those who gave their lives is equally significant whether they died in the Battle of the Bulge, on a mountainside in Korea, or in a rice paddy in Indo-China.

And the horrors of war are alive in the memories of all war veterans returning in the 40's and 50's. And they used their benefits to help build America to its zenith. Shouldn't veterans who survived an "unpopular" war be accorded the same privileges and chances to make their own valuable contributions to America's strength and health?

Isn't it time that veterans of all wars our country has called its youth to engage in--in the name of Equality and Democracy and Freedom--receive the same benefits and recognition?