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Vietnam veterans seek recognition as panel of the

Tribute to Veterans

VETERANS, From A1

to be known as "doves" to the flag-waving conservatives, is for the vets. The "doves" ran the Senate hearing. The conservatives dominated the luncheon. But that doesn't extinguish their old differences about the war.

President Nixon found relatively safe ground in between the two events—a military ceremony at Ft. McNair where a small gathering of military and civilian leaders plus hospitalized war veterans heard him predict that someday America will be proud of its role in Vietnam.

The soldiers and airmen who served there, he said, can be proud that the "American effort . . . was in good conscience, honorably undertaken and honorably ended." That judgment, he added, is "quite different from the instant analysis we see and hear."

Whether most American veterans of Vietnam share that perspective is not known. But it was clearly at odds with the angry tone expressed at the Senate veterans hearing, where the mention of Mr. Nixon's name elicited cat-calls, where three officials from the Veterans Administration manfully weathered a storm of ad-lib complaints.

Sen. Vance Hartke (D-Ind.), chairman of the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee, fed the packed crowd of vets some raw-meat rhetoric and they responded lustily, as the television cameras rolled. Hartke held up a bumper sticker proclaiming the "Honor Vietnam Veterans" sentiment—a bumper sticker issued by the luncheon's conservative sponsors, The National Honor Vietnam Veterans Committee.

"A bumper sticker won't pay the tuition," said Hartke archly. "It also won't put any food on the table. You

can't eat bumper stickers, can you?" The vets roared.

The man on Hartke's grid-dle was Odell W. Vaughn, the VA's director of benefits, who happens to be a disabled vet himself from World War II. "The records show," Vaughn said quietly, "that a greater percentage of Vietnam era vets are taking advantage of benefits than after World War II."

"No, no!" they shouted. "Not so!"

Hartke argued that the educational stakes are higher today, both the cost and the necessity of going to college. "Amen," some one shouted. "Money man, money," said another angry voice. A black vet from Massachusetts held aloft a sign that said: Brother, can you spare a dime?"

Hartke turned to other aggravations, like the late checks that leave veterans and their families without living expenses, not to mention their tuition. It touched another nerve.

"We take these people," the senator said, "and move them 6,000 miles across the ocean and put them in the hands and tell them to fight hands and tell them to fight and we do that efficiently and ably. Yet we can't get a VA check out on time." The room thundered with applause and shouting.

Odell Vaughn smiled gamely. When he tried to explain another VA program, one that pays full college tuition for seriously disabled men who can study anywhere, a veteran taunted him: "Why do you have to get shot to go to Harvard?"

As Smith and his aides departed, a shaggy vet from Texas, wearing a John Dean T-shirt, threw a handful of pills at them. "You can have them back," he snarled, "pill-head!"

A panel of veterans got their turn at the witness tables, and Warren Nagle from New York read a GI bill of rights that laid out the problems, from inadequate cash to the less-than-honorable discharges that blight the future for hundreds of thousands of veterans.

And the senator from Indiana discovered that, once the guys from the VA had departed, the crowd turned to him as the next-best target for their wrath. When Hartke tried to close the show, the vets let him have it. He promised more hearings in April.

"April?" shouted one of them. "We don't want more hearings, goddammit!"

"Starvation with honor!" another hollered. Hartke suggested they should take their message downtown to the VA headquarters. They booed louder.

"Lies, lies, lies," said someone at the microphone. Hartke gavelled adjournment. A white vet and a black vet grabbed the mike at the witness table.

"They walked out on us," the white vet exclaimed. "They don't want to hear what we're saying."

"That's American justice, brother, that's American

tions outshouted the hard facts of their case. "I told these guys to cool down and stop alienating people," complained Paul Camacho from Boston College. "Right now we're down here to talk about money."

At the White House, as Mr. Nixon was departing for a weekend in Florida, a group of five disgruntled veterans tried to get an audience with him. They did get in for a brief meeting with presidential assistant James Cavanaugh, who promised a prompt response to their inventory of grievances.

Ron Kovic, the group's wheelchair-bound leader from Delray, Calif., said afterwards: "We left the White House today with the idea that somebody is going to take some positive action. But if the administration doesn't respond, they're going to see a veterans' protest like nothing they've ever seen."

The luncheon at the Washington Hilton was something else—martial music from the Army Band, spring chicken tarragon, a heavy speech against communism by Strom Thurmond, a general theme of proud patriotism. Roughly half of the 700 seats were empty, so was the third tier of VIP seats on the dais.

If Gay Pitcairn Pendleton, a gray-haired lady with a jeweled flag pin on her suit-coat, was disappointed by the response, she concealed it nicely. She is a wealthy Philadelphian—from the

soil, as a result of answering their country's call to duty, returned without flag-waving, ticker-tape parades and public acclaim."

She warned her audience of civic leaders, political figures, veterans officials, that the debt is still owed to those 2.5 million men.

"Because we set aside this day to honor those men does not excuse this month from the responsibility of righting the wrongs that have been done," she said. "This should be not only a day to honor our Vietnam veterans, but it should and must be a day to make restitution."

Her special day also provided a platform for a few of the vets to explain some of the things that continue to plague them. Carl McCardin, a black Army major from New York, said he felt uneasy at the banquet table when so many vets were unemployed or without adequate cash.

"Yet," he said, "it is hard for me to come down hard on the people in this room because you apparently care. I can feel that."