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# Vietnam Vets: An Unpopular War Rubs Off

IN THE END, for most of us, the only goal we could see in Vietnam was the sight we finally saw on our television screens early Monday morning: the return of the prisoners. By the end, the men whose captivity was caused by the war had become the only cause for continuing the war.

Irrational as it was, that was our goal, and the tears of relief at their return were genuine—perhaps the first positive, shared emotion about Vietnam the people of this nation have experienced in a decade.

THEY ARE COMING back, and so, too, are the remaining American troops in Vietnam. And then, we are told, it will be over; at least, no more

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Americans will be fighting there, and we can begin to let it slip from our memories. Those who served there may have a harder time.

I spent the weekend reading a disturbing book about the Vietnam veterans, and I do not commend it to you, if you want to preserve the present mood of euphoria. It's called "No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran," and it was written last spring by Murray Polner, a historian and educator.

Polner conducted interviews with more than 200 Vietnam veterans, wrote case studies of nine of them and drew some speculative conclusions from all he'd heard.

WHAT HE SAYS is something we all know, but prefer not to think about. This war, the longest war in our history, was also the least democratic war of our century. There was no equality of sacrifice. The children of the affluent—those in college or with subsidized early marriages—were, for most of the war, exempt from military service. Those who fought were, as Polner says rather cruelly, "our new expendables."

While they were out in Vietnam fighting, those of us at home began to change our minds about the cause in which they had been committed. The Gallup Poll graph on those who believed Vietnam had been "a mistake from the beginning" rose steadily.

When the Vietnam veterans have come home, they have found themselves, too often, treated not as men who had made an extraordinary sacrifice for their country, but as chumps who had been suckered into playing a game the rest of us smart guys had figured the rest of us smart guys had figured out was rigged.

Thus, they have been faced not only with the disruption of their own lives but with the burden of the society's second thoughts about the mission in which they were engaged. They have not been borne home in triumph; instead, they have been treated, too often, as unwelcome reminders of an event we would sooner forget.

THE POWs are in a different category, of course. They have been the focus of so many hopes for so long that they will be lionized—perhaps more than they want to be. President Nixon's example in insisting that their family reunions should be private occasions, not public ceremonies attended by public men, is a lesson everyone can heed.

But the longer-range problem, not just of the POWs but of all the Vietnam veterans, is one that will require more than restraint and sympathy from the rest of us.

It was perhaps best put by Captain Max Cleland, a triple amputee who lost both arms and his right leg at Khe Sanh, whose 1970 testimony to a Senate committee is quoted in Polner's book.

"To the devastating psychological effect of getting maimed, paralyzed, or in some way unable to re-enter American life as you left it," Captain Cleland said, "is added the psychological weight that it may not have been worth it; that the war may have been a cruel hoax, an American tragedy, that left a small minority of young American males holding the bag. These doubts go beyond just the individual involved. They affect his family, his friends, and many times, his community . . ."

"THESE psychological repercussions," the young Silver Star winner continued, "do not hit you right away . . . The inevitable psychological depression after injury coupled with doubts that it may not have been worth it come months later, like a series of secondary explosions, long after the excitement of the battlefield is far behind; the reinforcement of your comrades-in-arms a thing of the past, and the individual is left alone with his injury and his self-doubts."

The test of this country's character will be its willingness to see that such men are not "left alone" to face the consequences of the war we sent them off to fight.