

Vietnam Vet Is Forgotten American

By Jack Anderson

They called it peace with honor and said our men would come home on their feet, not on their knees. Just a year ago this week, the last combat troops were withdrawn. Now thousands of veterans find they are flat on their faces.

Vietnam was a war with no glory and, for the men who fought there, no heroes. Many of the young soldiers who risked their lives in the rain forests and rice paddies of Southeast Asia remain alienated from the society that sent them to a war most Americans neither wanted nor like to remember.

The memories are painful, and the process of forgetting has been harsh on the men who came back from Vietnam. The regrettable result: the Vietnam veteran has become today's forgotten American.

He came home to a cold welcome. He found his peers had taken the available jobs, his elders regarded him with suspicion and his government was interested only in cutting veterans' benefits.

The educational benefits of the GI bill, which helped two generations of vets complete their schooling, are now laughably inadequate. Even these small benefits get entangled in the bureaucratic red tape which snarls the Veterans Administration. Scores of former service-

men have complained to us that their college checks arrive too late or not at all.

GI loans for home purchases, which gave birth to clusters of small but adequate suburban residences across the nation, are virtually worthless in today's inflated real estate market.

Despite half-hearted efforts by the government, many veterans have found they cannot find decent jobs. In hard purchasing power, according to the VA's own private calculations, a single Vietnam vet buys \$203 less with his government check than did his father after World War II. Married vets are even worse off.

Disabled veterans tell us they don't receive adequate treatment, training or compensation. But the darkest cloud hanging over the Vietnam vet is the drug problem. An internal government memo reports that the American public "assumes that all Vietnam era veterans have abused drugs and this makes them more skeptical when it comes to hiring the younger veteran."

There's no denying many GIs came to rely on drugs in Vietnam, some to relieve the pain of wounds, others just to escape the cruel realities of war. The treatment centers promised by the Pentagon have fallen woefully short. They aren't even open to men who received "less than honorable" discharges, al-

though these men often are the ones who most need treatment.

Facing a hostile world that offers them insufficient benefits and few opportunities, some vets have fallen back on their chemical crutches.

Many veterans complain that President Nixon behaved as if the only men who served in Vietnam were the 600 POWs. While he was hosting them in a tent on the White House grounds, he gutted programs that would help the soldiers who didn't get captured.

He slashed disability compensation for severely disabled vets, opposed GI educational increases as "excessive and inflationary," impounded funds voted by Congress to help colleges enroll vets, cut funds for a "mandatory job listing" program intended to give vets first crack at over a million jobs, and vetoed special burial and health benefits for veterans.

In one celebrated case, the President's budget managers tried to save money by cutting off funds for cooling veterans hospitals in the summer. The Senate responded with a vote to cut off the air conditioning at the Office of Management and Budget. The hospital cooling systems were hastily restored.

The President paid brief attention to the veterans in 1972 when he was running for reelection. The "Veterans Mobile Outreach" program, for instance, sent vans to assist veterans three months before the

election. The scheduling and publicity were handled, not by the VA, but by the President's campaign committee. Veterans have charged that the vans visited areas where the President needed votes, not where veterans needed assistance.

But perhaps the biggest obstacle for the returning veterans is the Vietnam war itself. America hasn't yet recovered from the war. The nation was torn apart, and the wounds are deep and slow in healing.

Professional counseling was desperately needed, but seldom provided, for those returning from combat to a country in the midst of rapid social change. The forlorn veteran, suddenly shorn of his uniform and confronted with the conflicts of a nation in turmoil, had nowhere to turn.

It is odd that a country that won't forgive those who refused to serve in Vietnam also refuses to reward those who did their duty. But the veteran is a living symbol of that war, a reminder to his fellow Americans of a pain they would rather forget.

So in a sense, the forgotten veteran has become the last victim of the Vietnam war.

Footnote: Dozens of Massachusetts vets are planning to come to Washington on March 29 to sell apples on street corners. "Project Apple" is patterned after the post-World War I action of veterans.

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