

The Perception of Returning War Veterans

“How do you think the perception of the way you were treated when returning from the war has affected the way current returning veterans are treated?”

Honor, respect, dignity, heroism. These are the overall sentiments that welcome home today’s returning men and women of the United States Armed Forces. Sadly, Vietnam War veterans did not experience this encouraging type of reception. Many who had deserved honor and respect, received a cold and shameful response from the American public. After discussing this matter with my father, a U.S. Navy and Vietnam War veteran, I gained much insight from his shared knowledge and experience. I learned that the compilation of political, economic, and social conditions surrounding both time periods influenced the disparity of how past and current veterans are treated.

The declared purpose for the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War was to bring freedom to the oppressed South Vietnamese citizens. Conflicting political and economic agendas unfortunately intermixed with this initiative. During this time, the United States was experiencing a strong presence of social unrest, rebellious attitudes, an unhealthy drug culture, and anti-war movements. The American public wrongfully displaced their negative sentiments toward the military, rather than toward particular government leaders who were ultimately responsible for the catastrophes and mistakes made during the war.

Upon returning home, many Vietnam War veterans were mocked, ridiculed, and degraded. This outward hostility was directed towards the courageous men and women who had endangered their lives so that other people could experience freedom. In my opinion, this general negative perception toward returning military veterans was wrong and cannot be justified.

The current war situation in the Middle East seems to be paired with a much different general perception of war veterans. The United States’ military involvement in the Middle East

dramatically increased after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. On that somber day, President Bush earnestly stated in an address to the nation, “Freedom was attacked this morning...and freedom will be defended.” Millions of Americans across the nation felt the impact of this tragedy on their own soil, and they realized the serious repercussions. A sense of unity bound people together during this national crisis, and they collectively expressed their support and care for the military volunteers who had sacrificially entered the war for the sake of America’s freedom.

Although general attitudes regarding the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have changed over the years, the American people of today seem to show honor to current returning war veterans. The news media reports true accounts of military men and women who demonstrate heroism and sacrifice. They also reveal the heart-warming stories of military veterans being welcomed home by family and friends. Furthermore, improved telecommunications have enabled the general public to be more informed regarding all aspects of current military engagements. This development in technology has also helped many people remain connected with their loved ones serving overseas. It seems apparent that there has been a positive change in the hearts of many Americans, as people are trying not to repeat the same mistakes made when Vietnam War veterans had returned.

Over the years, I remember watching and admiring my father as he came across military veterans. He would go out of his way to engage in conversation and personally thank them for serving our country. As I have been learning more about organizations conducted by Vietnam War veterans, I can see how they have a vital role in contributing to the positive shift in how returning military veterans are treated. They have made intentional efforts to properly welcome home and provide our military with the essential care in their transition and recovery. As a result

of their own negative experiences, Vietnam War veterans truly understand the importance of showing kindness, respect, and continual support for those returning from the atrocities associated with war. They have set the model precedent for how my generation should honor the United States' military. Having come to recognize this, I now have a much deeper appreciation for those in uniform who serve our nation.