

BY

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We ask ourselves, "When will it end?"

Some 2.7 million men and women went to Vietnam. More than 57,000 didn't return. Over half a million others continue to suffer from physical or mental disabilities. Regardless of the hardships arising from the war itself, though, for countless Vietnam veterans, coming home was the greatest trauma. Unlike their counterparts from previous conflicts, no banners or welcoming parades awaited their arrival. Instead they were met with indifference at best, hostility at worst. Seldom was there a word of thanks.

The veteran was an unpleasant reminder of an unpopular war, and it often seemed as if the nation thought it could erase the bitter memories of the war years by wiping the Vietnam veteran from its consciousness.

In spite of the nation's failure to recognize their service, and in spite of the ostracism of their peers who did not serve, most Vietnam veterans forged ahead. Drawing on the added reserves of maturity and self-discipline gained through their war experiences, they kept their peace, and set about putting their lives back together.

Nine years have now passed since the cease-fire in Vietnam, and at last the courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty of the men and women who fought in Southeast Asia will

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be recognized. Congress has authorized the construction of a Vietnam veteran's memorial on a two acre site in Washington's Constitution Gardens. Efforts are underway to finalize its design. When completed, it will provide an eloquent and appropriate testimony to the soldiers of a difficult time.

As was perhaps inevitable with a memorial to a war like Vietnam where lingering divisions remain, soon after the monument's design was announced, it was embroiled in controversy. Sadly, it was a controversy which pitted Vietnam veteran against Vietnam veteran. Worse, none of the veterans involved disagreed with the idea that a memorial be built. Still, as columnists, Congressmen, and veterans' organizations were enlisted on either side, a stalemate evolved that many feared would signal an end to the project.

Then, something remarkable happened. Veterans split over the issue realized that the project was in jeopardy, and chose to set aside their preconceptions and come together in a effort to develop a consensus. Through the efforts of Virginia Senator John Warner, an original sponsor of the legislation authorizing the memorial, a meeting was held in Washington and an agreement reached under which three modifications would be made to the original design. Interior Secretary James Watt then moved to expedite their approval.

While the modifications, which include a flag, a statue of a serviceman near the wall, and additional wording for the inscription

The Vietnam veteran comes from a generation accused of being preoccupied with self-gratification. If that is true, he remains the exception. He took the hard course by choosing to serve when running away was easier. On his return, he suffered in silence while his service was demeaned, and those who sat in safe havens at home advancing their careers were accorded the moral high ground. Still, amazingly, 91 percent of those who served in Vietnam feel proud of their action, and fully two-thirds would serve their nation again if asked, studies show.

The accord on the memorial's design was but one more indication of the capacity of the Vietnam vet to put what's best for the nation at the forefront of his thinking. It is this quality that has made him an emerging force for national leadership. Perhaps it is best said by an inscription that will be added to the memorial at the base of the statue, taken from the wall of a bunker during the seige of Khe Sanh, " For those who fought for it, freedom has a flavor the protected will never know. "

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