

Trying to separate war from warriors

It will be another spring of disappointment for a lot of Vietnam war veterans. The good feeling of last November's dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington partly has been dispersed by a Veterans Administration that refuses to admit the existence of the Agent Orange problem and by many who think, as Rod Davis ironically put it in last month's Progressive



Eric Peterson

magazine, that "what we have left is a rather large contingent of exquisitely honed gladiators who mill around with their unseemly problems amid the amber waves of grain and purple mountain majesty."

Yet the memorial remains something tangible for Vietnam veterans, a sign that the country is ready to commit itself to that war's troubled veterans and survivors, or at least to admit they are there.

"The monument was the best thing that happened to Vietnam veterans since the end of the war," said post Vietnam era veteran John Koopman, president of the UNL Student Veterans. "They got the sense that 'Now we got something.' That means a lot."

The veterans' monument itself has become a kind of political battleground. It is a stark black granite wedge engraved with the names of the 57,939 American soldiers who were killed in Vietnam. At the time of the monument's dedication near the end of November, there was a national salute to Vietnam veterans in which more than 15,000 of them participated.

Conservative supporters and liberal critics of the war could not hold back from ideological comment on the proceedings. President Reagan made his famous statement about the noble intentions that he thought began the war: "We are beginning to appreciate that they were fighting for a just cause."

And many veterans who thought the starkness of the Vietnam monument was a sign of shame about the enterprise (and who shared Reagan's view of the war) secured the support of Interior Secretary James Watt for a couple of additions to the monument: a flagpole and a realistic sculpture of three soldiers, which will come later.

But Reagan's defense of the Vietnam War does not necessarily mean taking responsibility for all of its effects,

either in Southeast Asia or at home. "I think the Reagan administration's policies have indirectly hurt veterans because of cutting down the size of government," Koopman pointed out.

Particularly reprehensible is the Veterans Administration's negligence regarding Agent Orange — a defoliant extensively used in Vietnam, named for the orange-striped containers the stuff came in. Agent Orange contained dioxin, a poison that has caused blindness in some veterans and birth defects in the children of others. Koopman said the VA does not admit responsibility for Agent Orange infections beyond an occasional 5 percent disability payment for skin problems resulting from it. (Veterans' disability payments are made on a percentage basis of a fixed amount according to the extent of disability.)

Koopman said letters from the VA will begin with assurances of concern and involvement in the Agent Orange issue and end with the flat statement that there is no proof that the issue actually exists.

"They need more vocal people — they need to be pushed," Koopman said.

A larger and more persistent difficulty is what former VA administrator Max Cleland called trying to "separate the war from the warrior." Reagan looks at the Vietnam veterans as a good soldier who was prevented from doing his job by near-traitorous protesters at home, while a few people on the other side think of veterans as monstrous baby killers.

These ideological considerations are irrelevant to most Vietnam veterans, Koopman said. "They would see the war as happening," he said, "and disagree with it, and yet go out of duty and commitment, not so much to America as to your friends and the people you knew who were going."

The monument in Washington may help separate the war from the warrior. As Koopman said, "Whether Vietnam was right or wrong, we were really wrong to blame the veterans."



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