

WHAT THE VIETNAM VETERAN NEEDS

HON. BOB WILSON

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, November 13, 1979

● Mr. BOB WILSON. Mr. Speaker, I wish to call to my colleagues' attention the following excellent commentary from the Marine Corps Gazette.

Its author, James Webb, a former counsel on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, is a highly decorated veteran of Vietnam, and the author of a best selling novel on the war.

His assessment is insightful and the comparisons he draws are accurate, shattering the various myths that have grown entrenched about the men and women who chose the path of duty and responsibility in those troubled times.

I would hope that all of us will read and consider Mr. Webb's thoughts. The job of changing the abundance of misconceptions concerning the Vietnam veteran should most properly start here, with us.

The article follows:

WHAT THE VIETNAM VETERAN NEEDS

(By James Webb)

I am often asked by interested citizens what the Vietnam veteran needs in order to fully assimilate back into the mainstream of our society. I am usually expected to name some new veterans' benefit, or an improvement to an existing one; a psychological readjustment program, perhaps, or maybe a new employment package.

But, while such quantitative offerings might be helpful to some veterans, these are not the most urgent need for any of them: Our Vietnam veterans have simply never been accorded the dignity of their experience, and in my opinion, most of their substantive difficulties stem from this one spiritual failing of society in general.

Even the most materially successful Vietnam veterans still carry around a piece of hurt from not having had their combat sacrifices recognized by the nation that sent them off to fight.

As for the others, I wonder how many psychological problems would exist if our government and populace had allowed those troubled veterans to look positively on their contributions. I wonder what sort of employment programs would be needed if prospective employers recognized the essential honor of combat service, as opposed to combat avoidance, during the most politically troubled war in our history.

It is amazing to see the many misperceptions that continue to abound with respect to Vietnam and the people who fought there. Vietnam is remembered as a dirty little war, hardly a war in the traditional sense at all. And yet, even though there were no Iwo Jimas or Guadalcanals, Vietnam produced more combat casualties for the Marine Corps than World War II.

Vietnam is remembered as a war of the unwilling, conjuring visions of draftees being dragged kicking and screaming into uniform; and yet, two-thirds of those who served during the Vietnam era were volunteers, while two-thirds of those who served during World War II, the great "patriotic war," were drafted.

Vietnam is remembered as a political issue that pitted youth against age, widening the so-called "generation gap," while in reality it was an issue that pitted culture against culture within various age groups. Neither Abbie Hoffman nor Dr. Spock spoke for me, or for the people I served with.

It was a war where people my age could gain political credentials for the rest of their lives by taking a few weekends out of their college careers and marching against it, while those who gave years, and often portions of their bodies, gained no more than stigma.

In this context, it is interesting to note that, during all of Vietnam, only some 13,800 men actually refused the draft; for every man who actually refused to serve, four others died in Vietnam and more than 6,000 chose to serve.

It is also interesting to remember that, during the 1976 presidential campaign, when amnesty became such a hot issue, only some 2,000 draft evaders still remained in Canada—fewer men than those still missing in Southeast Asia.

Why did the media give so much play to the few who committed antisocial acts, and ignore the many who put their lives on the line?

We have never really put the Vietnam veteran himself into proper focus. He is viewed largely as a draftee who put his 18 months in and got his early out and was not in need of significant readjustment help. In fact, he spent more time in uniform than even his World War II counterpart, during a period when our society was undergoing so many changes that the whole era was characterized as the "Future Shock" syndrome. As such, the Vietnam veteran probably needed more readjustment help than the World War II veteran, and many Vietnam veterans no doubt continue to have problems that could have been eliminated or reduced by such help.

The Vietnam veteran is often still viewed as a habitual user of dangerous drugs. When I was on my nationwide tour promoting Fields of Fire, one of the most frequently asked questions from interviewers was whether I had ever used heroin, as if we all had walked around with a needle hanging out of our arms.

In fact, hard drugs never emerged on any scale at all until the very end of the war. As for other drugs, I find it incredibly ironic that marijuana use became a dangerous act when soldiers indulged during leisure time, yet the males and females of their peer group who stayed behind in college could and often did blow their minds every weekend on dope, mescaline, LSD and other drugs, with absolutely no stigma once they graduated.

I can honestly say that drug usage was much more prevalent at Georgetown Law School when I studied there than it ever had been while I was in the Marine Corps. Where did the law school graduates go? To prosecute drug cases. Where did the veterans go? To the unemployment lines, stigmatized by someone else's habit.

People too often remember the Vietnam veteran for the aberration of My Lai, rather than for the incredible courage and sacrifice that went into Khe Sanh, Hue City, Dak To and a thousand other places that never made the papers but caused all the frustration and fear and misery of every other war our countrymen have fought.

The Vietnam veteran is often characterized by bureaucrats as an "employment problem," on the same scale as ex-offenders. As a matter of fact, that has been one of the employment slogans for some time: Hire the veteran and the ex-offender, as if both need to be forgiven.

There has been an employment problem, but it has been caused in too many cases by events beyond the control of the veteran.

First, he was taken into the service right out of high school, for the most part, and had never begun a profession. Consequently, he had no reemployment rights when he returned, as did so many veterans of other wars. Second, there was a recession, and he had no seniority, so he was the first man out the door when a cutback occurred—last in, first out. Third, affirmative action programs gave court sanctions to employment

of women and minorities, so that employers were often reaching over the heads of the veterans to fill quotas. Fourth, because of the misperceptions about the nature of the war and of his service, too many people were afraid of him. As a result the Vietnam veteran too often found himself, and continues to find himself unemployed or underemployed.

What can you do to help the Vietnam veteran fit himself back into society on the terms of his experience?

First, understand the nature of the war, and of his part in it. Then, buy him the beer you owed him 10 years ago, and let him talk about it. You'll find out that he is by and large a class act, much tougher than his non-veteran peers, much more used to hassle and disappointment.

You'll also find out that he's probably the best patriot this country has ever produced, because he's had to think about his decision to serve for years, and despite what Jane Fonda and her friends might want you to believe, he doesn't feel like apologizing for having served. I have a feeling you'll be pleasantly surprised.

And you may end up offering him a job, or at least another beer. ●

ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

HON. BO GINN

OF GEORGIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, November 13, 1979

● Mr. GINN. Mr. Speaker, too often when the Congress wrestles with the problems of national economic health, tax policy, and inflation, we lose sight of the human dimension of the problems reflected in the national statistics.

This was brought home to me recently when I heard from my constituent, Mrs. Angelia H. Walker, of the small town of Twin City, Ga. Mrs. Walker is a single-parent homemaker, and also a teacher in the public school system of Georgia since 1967.

Mrs. Walker has devoted her professional life to the youth of her community, and I am sure she began her career as a teacher with no illusion that it would lead to a life of luxury. However, I believe she had a right to expect that her vocation would provide her a living sufficient enough to provide for her needs.

But in the turbulence of our national economy, in the wake of devastating inflation, and in the grip of an outmoded Federal tax program, she has lost that faith. I submit for inclusion in the RECORD at this point a letter which Mrs. Walker sent to me and to other elected officials.

SEPTEMBER 9, 1979.

GEORGE BUSBEE,
Governor,
Atlanta, Ga.

Mr. GOVERNOR: This is in regard to my income tax which seems to be extremely inequitable. Let me first explain that I am a single parent school teacher and that I earn \$676.91 take home pay. Last year we received a 6 percent increase in pay to my astonishment, when my first check arrived, it was \$3.81 less than my take home pay for the last year. I fully realize that my raise placed me in a higher income bracket, but how can I maintain any decent standard of living when inflation is running at 13 percent and my real income is actually dropping.

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