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Dear Professor Capps:

Your article is good. We haven't had occasion to use it, so I'm returning it. Perhaps the right occasion will present itself later.

Sincerely,



Robert A. Berger
Op Ed Editor

RAB:mk

WELCOMING THE VIETNAM VETERANS HOME

by

Walter H. Capps

I am not a combat veteran of the Vietnam War. Indeed, my feet have never touched Vietnamese soil. I am part of that episode only to the extent that I witnessed it from at home, and have tried to be attentive to the ways our society was affected and has responded. But though far removed from the military hostilities, I am certain that I, together with millions of Americans, participated fully in the event. Michael Herr said it best in the closing lines of his book, Dispatches, "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there."

The fact that more than 57,000 American men and women have been there, and died there, is well known. The name of each is inscribed on the Vietnam War Memorial to be dedicated this week in Washington. Each one will be spoken aloud during an around-the-clock candlelight vigil in National Cathedral, as part of a several days' National Salute to Vietnam Veterans.

Less known, and even more arresting, is the fact that there have been more suicides among Vietnam veterans than combat fatalities. Just as disturbing is the fact that the number of suicides has increased each year since 1975, when the war ended. This trend is not expected to peak until 1990.

Marching to ambivalent orders in an undeclared war for a cause too abstract to function powerfully, the fighting forces carried the burden of a fragmented selfconfidence and a conflicted national resolve. When they returned, they were blamed by some for not upholding American honor, and held responsible by others for prosecuting a war that was wrong and shameful. Transformed into anomalies within the society, many felt deceived, used, and cheated out of the best months and years of their lives. Today thousands carry permanent physical disabilities. 2.5 million have been exposed to Agent Orange, the debilitating chemical defoliant. An estimated half million suffer the emotional and psychological wounds commonly referred to as "post-traumatic stress." And those who love them most bear the marks of the same confusion, pain, self-deprecation, and not infrequent rage.

Shortly after he took office in 1981, following the return of the hostages from Iran, President Reagan presented a Medal of Honor award to Roy Benavidez, a 45 year-old retired Army sergeant, for bravery in Vietnam. The President used the occasion to lament the fact that when the troops returned from that war "they were greeted by no parades, no bands, no waving of the flag they so nobly served."

The national homecoming is late. It has been delayed. But this week it will occur. There will be a parade, with bands, flag-waving, patriotic speeches, and rededication to the causes of freedom. There is consensus now, as Max Cleland, triple-amputeed veteran of Vietnam, put it, that "never again can we send our brothers and sisters into battle unless we are also willing to welcome them home."

Serious discussion, painstaking inquiry and heated debate will continue, of course. No event in the nation's history, except the Civil War, has been as divisive and perplexing. No occurrence since Nagasaki and Hiroshima has had greater influence on our present outlook and enduring self-perception. In all of these respects, Vietnam remains an unfinished war.

But the time has come to accept what happened fully as fact and not illusion, a reflection of who we are, and no mere deception. In no other way can the shared experience of our "dark night of the soul" be directed toward fostering a deepening of the American character. The commemorative national salute is guided and supported by the dynamics of the post-war healing process in which this nation is still momentarily engaged.

Walter H. Capps is professor of religious studies on the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, and author of The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience (Beacon Press).