

## FORUM

# Vietnam tragedy festers as lessons go unlearned

PHILADELPHIA

**G**iven their druthers, most Americans would like to think the Vietnam War ended in 1975.

But the war is far from over. Eight years after the divisive conflict officially ended, the experience continues to hamper our national unity, future and collective conscience.

It does little good to downplay the effects of that recent chapter in American history — certainly, that is, in the case of politicians who denounce the "Vietnam syndrome's" restraints on U.S. intervention overseas as an emotional liability which we must shake. President Reagan's declaration at West Point last year that the "era of self-doubt is over" underscored a dangerous tendency to obscure the war's lessons.

Yet, Americans know that some of the biggest lessons of Vietnam remain to be mastered. For various possible reasons — such as the errors of our leaders or our own acquiescence — we're still confused about America's moral role in the world. Perhaps more immediate, we've yet to come to terms with those who fought a losing battle.

This failure is undoubtedly clear to the nation's 2.5 million Vietnam veterans, some of whom gathered here last week for an unprecedented convention. After four days of meetings, seminars and memorials, the primary question remained: Will Americans ever take them back?

Though most of the several hundred participants would admit that they've become a kind of cause celebre during the Reagan years they know that vogue alone won't solve their problems. Even as the stereotype of vets as fatigue-wearing crazies, druggies or losers fades, veterans have noted continuing disinterest in their needs and desires.

Dan Jordan, national commander of the United Vietnam Veterans Organization, cites four chief burdens that either unfairly or uniquely plague his membership:

When seeking medical benefits from the Veterans Administration, veterans find themselves confined to a system of VA-run hospitals in which outside opinions, so standard for the rest of us, are prohibited.

When appealing a claim, veterans don't have the benefit of an independent review system, which has long been a feature for Social Security disabilities.



MAXWELL GLEN

CODY SHEARER

and herbicides, veterans often find the VA unaccommodating.

Lastly, and most important, says Jordan, veterans are waiting for America to admit that it mistreated those who, for good or bad, did the fighting. "If Americans want to get over Vietnam, they will have to learn about it the hard way — talking to vets and understanding their not-so-pleasant problems," Jordan said.

Unfortunately, Vietnam may have left us so unsure of ourselves that we don't know how to bind the wounds. This fact seems betrayed by the vets' almost single-handed push for long-overdue Vietnam veterans memorials. Comparatively speaking, the rest of us seem light years away from moving independently to reintegrate vets into society.

Indeed, as Walter Capps of the University of California at Santa Barbara suggests, the divisions rent by Vietnam are only likely to widen. A religious studies professor and author of a recent book, "Vietnam and the American Conscience," Capps believes the conservative and religious tendency to restore America to its pre-Vietnam glory bypasses — not confronts — the lessons of the era. The telltale sign of a growing split may lie in the ever-increasing number of young men — 700,000 at last count — who refuse to register with the Selective Service System.

Capps concludes that unless we realistically consider how Vietnam changed this country and affected its citizens — participants and non-participants alike — we'll never truly shake its grip. We'll remain a much-divided land, leaving Vietnam's veterans on a lonely but important search for a fair shake.

"You can't just put what we've seen behind us," said Capt. Dave Christian, the highly decorated Green Beret who founded UVVO. "You can't hide it like a wound in a closet, where it will fester. You have to pull it out, and take the good from it, the bad from it, and learn from it."

Whether these veterans can mobilize public interest and support for their problems remains to be seen. It's a mas-