

# Vet Status Both a Plus, Minus

By C. David Kotok

World-Herald Staff Writer

Hooksett, N.H. — George Brentley left his non-alcoholic beer on the American Legion bar Sunday to approach Bob Kerrey to tell him that he has the support of most Vietnam veterans.

Veterans have been a target for the Kerrey campaign. The candidate ends many days of campaigning with stops at legion posts and VFW halls in this state. Some of Kerrey's fellow Navy veterans also have traveled the state on behalf of the Democratic presidential candidate from Nebraska.

The advantage Kerrey would seem to enjoy as a war hero in a state with a high proportion of veterans may be an illusion, Kerrey and others said.

The controversy over Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton's draft status in 1969 did more than raise new questions about Clinton's character. It reawakened the division that made the war the main issue in the presidential campaigns of 1968 and 1972, Kerrey said in an interview.

"The war divided this country in a very painful fashion," Kerrey said. "There was an expectation that I would ride (the Medal of Honor) to glory."

Walter Capps, a University of California at Santa Barbara professor who instructs the largest college class in America on the Vietnam War, said that as he watched Kerrey's presidential announcement Sept. 30, "I wanted to think, 'This is how the Vietnam War ends.'"

But Kerrey's candidacy seems "to bring back all the conflict," said Capps,

who campaigned for Kerrey in New Hampshire last week.

"It evokes an ambivalence of conflicting feelings," Capps said. "The Medal of Honor, that speaks to heroics — but heroics in an unpopular war."

"It isn't a negative, but it's not an unambivalent plus. I think Vietnam is still difficult for people to think about. A woman came up to me in an American Legion hall and said, 'I wish he wouldn't talk so much about being a Vietnam vet. So many Vietnam vets are mixed up.'"

Kerrey said many of his campaign advisers and some national commentators don't comprehend the complicated reaction he often gets to his war record.

While Clinton gets questions about why he wasn't drafted, Kerrey said, Vietnam veterans are asked why they entered the service.

"It's not accidental that there are not many Vietnam veterans in politics," he said. "It wasn't just that we didn't get a welcome home or a parade. Parade — big deal. I love parades, but ... as returning soldiers that's not as important as the attitude that was there."

"It's not over. It's still there. My guess is that if you watched people respond to just the word Vietnam, they don't respond to it in a positive way."



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