

Speeches and messages: 1974 (1 of 2): [Vietnam veterans]

Senator Daniel K. Inouye Papers

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news from

Senator DANIEL K. INOUE

topic: SPEECH BY SENATOR DANIEL K. INOUE

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I was saddened--but not surprised--to learn that more than one-third of Vietnam veterans who were interviewed during a recent opinion poll said that, so disheartened are they by their country's indifference to their sacrifice, they would prefer to live in another country. One need only remember the welcome that veterans of other wars, especially those of World War II, received upon returning home to understand this anguished indictment by soldiers who risked their lives in the jungles of Southeast Asia on our behalf.

When I returned with my combat buddies to Hawaii following World War II, we were greeted by special holidays and parades. Proclamations were made by the territorial governor, legislators, and other elected officials. Every big shot wanted to shake our hands. Massive celebrations in Honolulu were repeated on a smaller scale in every village and town. Banquets, luaus, speeches, and medals were given to honor us. Simply stated: We were greeted as warrior heroes. It was heady stuff that helped us to forget the pain and terror of war.

Of special importance to our later lives were the generous G.I. benefits which were enacted by the federal, State, and local governments. Hawaii gave to each veteran with even the slightest disability a \$300 bonus. The U.S. G.I. bill gave every veteran the opportunity to attend the college of his choice. Our tuition was paid by the Veterans Administration and we received a monthly stipend to cover our living costs.

As lawmakers tried to outdo each other in helping out our war heroes, some benefits were enacted that were less than essential. For example, leg amputees were provided with free automobiles specially designed for their use. Free cars, however, also were made available to blind veterans with no concern as to who would drive them. Hospitalization, medical care, vocational rehabilitation, mustering out pay and reemployment programs all flourished. Employers in a booming economy were eager to hire veterans. G. I. s were quickly given responsible positions in government and business.

Seven million World War II veterans benefited from the G. I. bill. The lives of each of us were changed by the opportunity provided to us. I do not believe I would be in the United States Senate today without having been a beneficiary of the bill. There are 19 other Senators and 65 Congressmen who also went to school under the G. I. bill, and who feel as I do about its effect on them.

The G. I. bill transformed our entire educational system. Before World War II, a college education was available primarily to the sons and daughters of the wealthy. As G. I. bill dollars enabled public colleges and universities to expand their facilities, academic resources, and to develop highly trained faculties, a college education became possible for the average American.

The Vietnam war was unlike World War II. Vietnam was a conflict that the American people did not understand and eventually grew to despise. When we finally withdrew our forces a little more than a year ago, we tried to forget that we had ever been there. Only those millions of combat soldiers who lived the agony of Vietnam remember daily, and we have also forgotten them.

Over 50,000 Americans died in Vietnam. More than 340,000 men returned disabled--having lost arms, eyes, ears, legs, faces, genitals, and brains. Thousands of those who returned without having been physically harmed came back with severe psychological problems. And even those millions who arrived home physically and mentally whole left a few years of their lives behind on Asian soil.

Five hundred P. O. W. s also returned. They received special VIP treatment--they were greeted with Presidential White House dinners, mass media exposure, gifts from automobile makers, local receptions, and special gratitude for their sacrifices. Of course, the P. O. W. s deserved these accolades. But what about the 7 million other Vietnam veterans--where are their parades, their holidays, their luaus?

The fact that Americans disagreed over the purpose and methods of our involvement in Vietnam is no reason for us to penalize the soldiers who fought that war for us. Many of them did not want to go to Vietnam, but when they were drafted, they accepted their duty. Many of them found that the war they had to wage did not fit their vision of a moral crusade against communism; still they served as well as they could.

Now they are home and what do they find? Employers, apparently accepting the myth that every G. I. in Vietnam used drugs, ask the veteran, "Are you an addict?". Their family and friends avoid discussing the subject of Vietnam entirely. Their President proclaims great concern for their plight, then vetoes, impounds, or opposes Congressionally approved benefits. The Veterans Administration loses their benefit checks.

V. A. hospitals are unable to provide necessary medical and psychological care. Unemployment remains a special plague, as a stagnant economy provides no place for the veteran without an education. G.I. education benefits are inadequate to permit the veteran--particularly if he is poor or married--to get the education he needs to find a job. And finally, Congressmen and Senators who never hesitated to vote money for bullets and bombs, spend months bickering over how much money we can afford to help the veteran find his way back to a useful and healthy role in our society.

It is no wonder that the veterans shout and curse. It is also not surprising that many of them no longer feel attached to this country as their home. They have not forsaken us; they feel that we have forsaken them.

I want to add my voice to their shouts and curses. The Vietnam war cannot be over for us until we redeem our commitment to the men who accepted the risks of war. This unfinished business tops the agenda for public action.

The first priority is to bring veterans' benefits up to the level of those received by the veterans of World War II and Korea. Due to the rate of inflation and increases in tuition and other educationally related expenses, a single Vietnam veteran receives more than \$1,800 per year less, in inflation-adjusted dollars, in educational benefits compared to the World War II veteran. I have authored legislation that will end this discrimination. The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs has reported out a new G. I. bill which includes the bulk of my recommendations. After the Senate approves this legislation--which I am confident it will--the House and the President must act.

Opposition from both is anticipated. I do not believe that that opposition is justified. I hope that you will agree with me and will let the President and the Congress know your feelings.

The next priority is to find a suitable replacement for Donald Johnson, director for the Veterans Administration, who has announced his intended retirement in the face of a barrage of criticism. The V. A. is undeniably suffering from both a vacuum of leadership at the top and inadequate staffing in many local level offices and V. A. hospitals. The Nixon Administration, in placing 13 former employees of the Committee to Re-elect the President in major positions in the V. A., has politicized an agency that must serve all veterans, irrespective of politics.

The V. A. needs a shake-up of major proportions. I think that there is a man who can shake up and shape up the V. A., so that, once again, it will serve the needs of the veteran and not the dictates of the White House. That man is well known in Hawaii as a friend of the serviceman. He is retiring Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt.

Finally, every American--no matter how he or she feels about our involvement in Vietnam--should search his or her soul and conscience to come to grips with our own feelings and responsibilities toward the young veterans who served us all. Vietnam was the war that nobody wanted, nobody won, and everybody wants to forget.

I owe much to this great country of ours. I would serve again if the need arose. But I would hope that my military service would neither be forgotten nor held against me.

When we meet a Vietnam veteran, he does not want to be treated differently. Too often, he is treated as some kind of curiosity--a possible drug addict, potentially violent, probably disturbed. The veteran wants to be treated like every other American veteran who went to war before him; that is, as a citizen who accepted his responsibility, not because he was different, but because it seemed the right thing to do. Let us give him the respect that he is due, and let us display our gratitude for the sacrifices that he made.

Of course "war is hell," and it seems that the Vietnam war was somewhat more hellish for those who fought without the traditional homefront support of previous wars.

Peace has become hell for hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans. We can change that if we will only pledge not to forget those brave men and to commit ourselves to welcoming them into our places of work, our homes, and our society, as full-fledged Americans with a special claim on our love and gratitude.