

Thank you for your service

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When U.S. military service members came back home from Vietnam, they often were shunned, spit on, or discriminated against when trying to obtain work. At best they were ignored. For many years. Even by the veterans from World War II – our Greatest Generation. In short, most were not welcomed home or thanked for their service.

The safest course of action was to take off the uniform, stash it in a sea bag or put it in a Dumpster, hunker down, and pretend like you never even saw a war movie let alone thought about serving.

Decades passed and the social fabric of the nation changed. Many of those who screamed in protest “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Min, Ho Chi Min is gonna win,” and applauded Hanoi Jane, at some point began to focus their feelings about the Vietnam War into profound disagreements with political decisions and decision makers. Feelings about the war or politicians were one thing. Feelings about the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines were another.

Many finally realized these men and women were either drafted or volunteered to do what they thought their country wanted them to do in Southeast Asia. As time progressed, there was an apparent national guilt about making the common service member the scapegoat for a war they did not cause, did not understand, but were willing to commit to support as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces.

What was society’s new response to American servicemen? To try to make amends for past insults by thanking veterans and service members for signing a blank check to give, if needed, their lives, their bodies, and their healthy minds to serve in the armed forces. It didn’t matter if they served in combat, stateside support missions, or in a multitude of small wars. Today’s veterans receive a different and justified response from society.

As one who had eggs thrown at him while doing recruiting duty during the Vietnam War, the change in society’s view of servicemen was, and sometimes still is, hard to comprehend. As one whose mother was told at work that her son was a baby killer and they hoped he died, I could not grasp why her fellow newspaper reporters would take it out on her for my standing up for my country and doing what I thought was the right thing. At 97 years old, she has still mental scars from those verbal assaults. What did she ever do to deserve being scorned?

“Thank you for your service.” How should I respond to that? I understand it is an attempt to say the right thing, to atone for past behavior, but is it appropriate? Some older veterans do not know how to respond.

I, for one, appreciate the gesture, the offers of special discounts for veterans, for recognition, as a way to make up for facing the crowds on college campuses as draft-deferred students ruined my uniforms with their more than vocal assaults at a different time when military service was not appreciated.

“Thank you for your service” – I always smile and say, “Thank you.”

At one point in my life, I wrote the nation a blank check. There was, and is, no expiration date on that check. Millions of young men and women have written that check.

Our nation needs to have the ability to cash those checks when necessary.

“Thank you” for appreciating my service.