

## Why was the Public Perception of Returning Vietnam Veterans so Different than World War II Veterans?

There is a definite contrast between the public's perception of the returning World War II and Vietnam veterans. Upon their return to the United States, World War II military men were regarded as true heroes by the vast majority of the American public. People were relieved that good had finally triumphed over evil. During the Vietnam war, much of the young American public displayed bitter anger towards the military. This was a result of the media presenting sentiments that rejected patriotism through publicizing college-aged Americans who practiced rampant anti-war demonstrations.

There are several reasons for the American public's varying reactions toward the returning veterans of World War II and Vietnam. First, the cultural atmosphere of each era influenced the reactions of the American public. Second, the United States' purpose for joining each war played a major role in the sentiments that were expressed. Finally, the resolution of one war and the continued chaos of the other contributed to opposite reactions.

Traditional American values were emphasized during the World War II era. Many who had experienced the Great Depression first hand contributed to a national sense of appreciation and gratitude. The principles that people lived by correlated with their dedicated support shown for the United States military.

Following World War II, baby boomers were distanced from understanding the sacrifices military men and their families had made a generation earlier. A post-war economic boom contributed to the increasing insensitivity. The Vietnam war began around the time of much social unrest. Heavy involvement in movements that supported civil rights, free speech, peace,

and anti-establishment were fueled in part by college students and other young Americans who participated in the drug culture. Anti-war sentiments were initiated by some of the “intellectually” elite and became prevalent in many metropolitan universities across the nation as the media brought them into the public spotlight. Due to these factors that occurred during the war, many dedicated Vietnam veterans were ridiculed and unfairly treated upon their return to the United States.

The United States entered World War II in the Pacific Theater following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. American citizens understood that because their nation was involved in a major war, it was necessary to maintain a united home front that industriously supported the military. The positive sentiments that Americans held for the military aided the United States’ overall strength and morale throughout the war. The outcome of the struggle was successful as the allied forces were victorious over both Nazi Germany and Japan. Although millions of innocent lives were slaughtered, further disaster was prevented by the costly efforts of our military. The American public shared the euphoria of the triumph over the evil regimes of the Nazi and Japanese empires.

The United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War did not result in the same public support as in World War II. The United States entered the Vietnam War in order to help provide freedom for the South Vietnamese citizens who suffered under communist oppression. The condition of Vietnam following the prolonged struggle worsened almost immediately after the peace treaty was signed between North and South Vietnam.

The military men who unselfishly dedicated their lives to seek restitution for the Vietnamese citizens, were coldly received by the American public. Upon their return, the

American public unfairly displaced anger of the war's outcome on to the veterans. Because the government mandated the actions that were taken during the war, military individuals did not deserve the blame for the catastrophic results.

Thousands of honorable U.S. citizens fulfilled a costly duty to their country while serving in Vietnam. Although many of these men were drafted into service, the majority of the military population consisted of male citizens who voluntarily enlisted in the armed forces. These men were willing to sacrifice their lives for citizens of a foreign country to obtain the freedom, peace, and democracy that had been so carefully and painstakingly preserved for generations in America. The cost of freedom is truly never free.

After speaking with my father, a U.S. Navy veteran, about his role in the Vietnam war, I better understand how the sacrifices of the Vietnam veterans help protect our country's freedom. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to interview and write about a veteran's experiences in the war. I am proud of my father and all those who have served our nation.