

EDITORIAL

A 4th of July for all veterans

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It's been 25 years since Newton, Iowa, population 15,000, had a Fourth of July celebration of the red, white and blue variety that comes complete with fireworks and parade.

Today, Newton residents are rectifying that. The parade will feature a band, 50 to 60 floats, balloons, color guards and flags - lots of flags. A real estate company has enlisted the Boy Scouts to help plant 2,000 miniature American flags along the one-mile parade route and the Chamber of Commerce gave out another 2,000 flags.

What is happening in Newton is symbolic of the attitude around the country. While many communities have continued the July 4 tradition of parades and fireworks, what has been missing in most cases is a real sense of celebration - a jubilation that the United States of America exists and is marking another birthday.

Newton's - and the nation's - renewal of spirit and pride can largely be traced to our nation's performance in the Persian Gulf War. U.S. and allied military forces performed almost miraculously. The planning, the deployment, the weapons systems and the actions of individual men and women were efficient and decisive.

But in large measure, it was a victory for the American people as well. The resolve of the U.S. citizens to back up tough talk with fighting forces to right a wrong was vital to the success of Operations Desert Storm and Shield.

Returning military personnel say the overwhelming support, which was shown with letters, cookies and care packages, was important to the initiative. Also vital was the knowledge that the roles they were playing were accepted and not vilified.

In many ways the military victory on the other side of the globe renewed our faith in ourselves and wiped out lingering feelings of failure and incompetence left over from the Vietnam era. For the nation, the Vietnam syndrome came to an end in the sands of southern Iraq.

Unfortunately, for many veterans of the Vietnam War there hasn't been a conclusion. Vietnam vets did not get parades, or well-publicized discounts at stores and amusement parks, or care packages, letters, ribbons, banners and the prayers and thanks of a grateful nation.

In that area too, Newton's parade is symbolic. Vietnam veterans are a big part of that parade, not an afterthought or a small marching unit being tolerated, but an integral part of the welcome home theme. Newton's Vietnam vets are getting an official welcome home party.

It is good and right that we did support and now thank Desert Storm troops. But too-long delayed is our support and thanks for the men and women who served their nation two decades earlier. Perhaps because it was an unpopular war, they deserved the support all the more.

But just finally saying thanks isn't enough. The direct and indirect criticism of Vietnam vets must cease. Just as non-smokers suffer damage from the second-hand smoke of human ashtrays, so did Vietnam veterans suffer second-hand criticism again this year.

The Desert Storm troops, it was said, were well-trained, well-educated and had high morale - unlike Vietnam era forces. It's true that the average member of the armed services today is better educated, but that is largely due to the end of the draft. It's to the nation's credit that today's soldiers are better trained and equipped, but that should not reflect badly on those who did serve in Southeast Asia.

Millions of American men and women served in the jungles of Vietnam. The vast majority of them were good, competent people sent to fight in a conflict that many of their countrymen didn't support. Only a tiny percentage of them were the drug-using, gun-wielding wackos in long hair and fatigues portrayed so often on television and movies.

In fact, Vietnam veterans are spread throughout the United States as farmers, judges, doctors, teachers, senators and parents. Many did not choose to serve in that war, but despite that most of them served their nation well.

To them we say thank you, welcome home and happy Fourth of July.

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