

Senator Fights for Vietnam Veterans Day



Sen. Richard Burr talks with NATO advisers in Kabul, Afghanistan.

When the last U.S. combat troops returned from Vietnam in 1973, “Unfortunately they arrived home to a country in political turmoil, and never received the recognition they deserved,” said Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.), ranking member of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. In 2013, for the fifth consecutive year, Burr introduced a bill to honor veterans who served in Vietnam by designating March 29 Vietnam Veterans Day. So far there is no permanent day nationally, although President Barack Obama proclaimed a Vietnam Veterans Day on March 29, 2012, to mark the 50th anniversary of the war. To Burr’s credit, however, about 35 states have adopted an official Vietnam Veterans Day in March.

Why now for the upsurge in recognition of Vietnam veterans?

We see this phenomenal outpouring of support from American citizens for service men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and we see the great welcomes they are receiving as they come back. Then, we look back and see the blemish of Vietnam and how

those who fought there were welcomed back. We saw an opportunity to remedy that by creating an annual day for recognition. We did hope that we would see initiatives at the state level that would leverage our recognition at the federal level.

You saw that leverage in action in North Carolina. How did that come about?

In the case of North Carolina, in 2011 at the conclusion of one of our big Honor Flights—the program in which we have brought thousands of North Carolina World War II veterans to Washington to visit the World War II Memorial—supporters, including local TV stations that participated heavily in promoting and covering the Honor Flights, came to me and asked what else they could do for our veterans. That is when we started thinking about how we could recognize Vietnam veterans. We began laying out a blueprint for a “welcome home” event in 2012. The long and short of it was that the event, held at the Charlotte Motor Speedway, was broadcast live over radio and TV across North Carolina.

We had the full-fledged support of the Department of Defense, and then private corporations stepped up in a big way.

Did that success encourage you to keep pushing the legislation?

It proved to me that recognition by Congress can be parlayed into other things and activities, such as the state-sponsored welcome home events. The driving force behind this and the legislation is not to debate what was right or wrong about the war, but simply to finally do the right thing in an attempt to heal wounds that might still be open. Further, we saw the chance in North Carolina to facilitate Vietnam vets’ access to Veterans Affairs, so we had a full complement of VA folks there. We hope that these events will help bring closure to veterans or encourage them to get the help they need to deal with the war’s demons. There isn’t any downside; it’s all upsides.

How can Vietnam vets take a role in helping today’s young veterans?

They’ve been through it all. They are not only battle-tested, they have been challenged by their memories for a long time. We don’t do a good job with mental health treatment and I’m afraid we’ve let the VA get by with simply saying that by virtue of all the psychiatrists in the system, vets must be getting good treatment. The fact that we’ve got Vietnam veterans still in treatment, giving us decades of treatment as a comparison, should teach us how to better treat this new generation of combat veterans.

The legislation also promotes bringing civilians and the military population closer together in a new way.

There is a generation of folks who regret how Vietnam vets were treated, and they

need a way to feel that they can come back under the tent. The day of recognition is, I think, a way to do this. I bet that if you went around the country to these celebrations, you would probably see many people who had protested the Vietnam War there helping to organize these events because they are trying to better themselves for what they may regret they did in the past.

How does the Vietnam War influence what you as a senator do when the military is called to intervene, such as in Syria?

There are some similarities. The Vietnam War was fought to stop the spread of communism. Today’s wars are to fight the spread of fanatical Islamic jihadists. The boundaries may have been clearer in Vietnam than they are today, but to the same extent the toolbox we have to work with is different too. I think we are recognizing that we can be effective without necessarily putting boots on the

ground. That is an extremely important thing to realize—as is the fact that the military cannot run our foreign policy. In the case of Syria, I think the decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has probably put the military brass in the position that they don’t want anything to do with Syria. I, for one, was screaming last year for a no-fly zone, taking an effective action without invading Syria that would have little to no impact on our military readiness and potential loss of life. But not doing that meant that the conflict in Syria has escalated to something that I think does require an international response. That reluctance, I think, is the military’s deep desire that things go back into a more predictable mode. As I see it, there are very few things in the world that are predictable anymore. I hope negotiations will work out and we can secure the chemical weapons, but we are still waiting to find out if biological weapons are included.

Any chance Vietnam Veterans Day will become a permanent holiday?

I would love for it to become a permanent holiday and to avoid going through the annual legislative process. But the jurisdiction to make it a permanent holiday falls on the Senate Judiciary Committee, and we have been unable to capture the chairman and the ranking member at the level of commitment to do this. With the limited actions we’ve taken in Congress and what has been leveraged on a local basis, I hope Vietnam veterans understand that they are as important a generation of heroes as the kids who are coming back today and the World War II veterans we call the “greatest generation.” It seems history has a much better ability to reward everybody for the sacrifices they make. I simply want, in some small way, to stimulate public outreach to and positive recognition of the Vietnam generation of veterans. ★