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Thank you for your service: America's shrinking military

By Ralph Negrón

In 1969, the 101st Airborne Division (the Screaming Eagles) fought one of the hardest battles of the Vietnam War. For 11 days, paratroopers from the 101st fought the battle-hardened 29th North Vietnamese Army Regiment, which was solidly entrenched on top of a hill the troops named "Hamburger Hill." After 11 days of fierce fighting in treacherous monsoon-weather conditions, the Screaming Eagles were finally able to wrestle the hill from its tough North Vietnamese occupiers. But it came at a steep price - 76 U.S. soldiers were killed and almost 400 more wounded.

In the same year, protesters organized the biggest demonstration of the era in Washington, D.C. The evening news showed enthusiastic demonstrators waving North Vietnamese flags and chanting in unison "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh." Hundreds of Americans enthusiastically waved flags that the Screaming Eagles had fought so hard to defeat.

Adding insult to injury, the provocative chant made a mockery of the U.S. government, which considered Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnam a threat to national security. It was convenient to dismiss these acts on the naiveté of mostly young college-age protesters. But the savvy activists fully comprehended

the significance of the symbols they were using to dramatize their objections. In 1969, we had become a nation at war with itself.

Americans had grown weary of war. Many disengaged themselves from the fighting raging on the other side of the world; unless, of course, there was a loved one still in the fight. Few Americans at the time paid much attention to the heroic actions of the Screaming Eagles in 1969. The battle is noteworthy, however, because it exposed the ultimate irony of the Vietnam War; which is that we won all the battles, like Hamburger Hill, but lost the war. Not to a foreign army, but to the loss of support from the American people.

There are many lessons from the Vietnam War, but none more important than the idea that a democratic nation cannot sustain a war without the will of its people. The loss of public support left government overseers with few options. There appears to be a similar public withdrawal developing today but it has taken a different passage.

Currently, America has the smallest number of citizens ever to serve in the armed forces. Less than 1 percent of the U.S. population is serving in uniform on active duty, the National Guard or reserves. This small group provides the thin veil that stands between America and its many foes. They get bloodied, endure squalid living conditions,

multiple deployments to dangerous places, and too often die so that you and I can remain safe.

In conjunction with the declining armed forces is the rapidly diminishing veteran population. Veterans provide an important bridge linking mutual understanding between the armed forces and the rest of the population. Through aging, the large veteran populations from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam have rapidly declined. Today less than 5 percent of the total U.S. population has ever been in uniform. The result is a nation with little firsthand knowledge about military service or war.

In 1969, Americans deliberately created a wall separating themselves from the military establishment out of weariness for the Vietnam War. Today the wall has re-emerged from complacency and lack of engagement by a public that has limitless respect for the men and women in uniform but prefers not to think about them or the possibilities of war.

The phrase "thank you for your service" has become a popular phrase used by well-meaning citizens to express gratitude to members of the military community and veterans.

Although I believe that most veterans appreciate the thought, it has a hollow ring since the person conveying the gratitude has no idea or interest about the realities of

that veteran's service.

Similarly, in Congress the new norm is to praise the military and support it without the skepticism that might be applied to other government institutions funded by American taxpayers. Support of the military might be the only bipartisan topic of agreement in Congress today.

As a quantitative measure of American confidence in its military, a recent Gallup poll indicates that 75 percent of the American public has full confidence in the U.S. armed services, as opposed to only 7 percent confidence in Congress. And with good reason. The professional armed forces that currently defend us is the best trained, best educated, motivated, and disciplined force that America has ever fielded. But it faces an imminent threat from a public that has "no skin in the game."

Gen. Douglas MacArthur once said: "The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war." MacArthur's comment is a poignant reminder that a nation needs engaged citizens who fully comprehend the consequences of going to war. And the Vietnam War is a good reminder that going to war has dire consequences unless a fully engaged citizenry supports it.

— *Ralph Negrón of Sandwich is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps and served in Vietnam.*