



Vietnam for the Ages

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

As we work to address current national challenges, there is no better guide than history. Every issue today appears new or unique or unprecedented, but there is always a relevant episode in the past that can serve as a guide, or a learning experience. Conditions in the world may change, but the nature of human beings remains constant.

My generation grew up in the midst of the Vietnam War. Our outlook was shaped in part by the political and social upheavals generated by our involvement in Southeast Asia. It was a most turbulent time in the American experience.

I remain extremely proud of, and grateful to, the three million Americans who fought in Vietnam. Some 58,000 were killed, including more than 3,400 Texans.

As we confront terrorists today in our current global challenge, including Iraq, it's important to learn everything possible about our Vietnam experience. How can we avoid mistakes we made in Vietnam?

More than 30 years after Vietnam fell, it's time for serious historians to take over the study of that experience. The most ambitious and significant effort is occurring at Texas Tech University, under leadership of Dr. James Reckner, a Vietnam veteran and current Tech history professor.

Working cooperatively with local Vietnam veterans in Lubbock, the Texas Tech administration has created the Vietnam Project to collect original source material, encourage scholarly research, and educate students and public about the war and its lessons.

The Project has already amassed an impressive collection of material, in some ways more comprehensive than the Library of Congress on this subject. It includes 11,000 linear feet of documents, eight million pages of manuscript materials, 12 million pages on microfilm, some 72,000 photographs and slides, about 80,000 books, 15,000 periodicals and newsletters, and more than 3,000 audiotapes, videotapes and CDs. Some 2.5 million pages have already been digitized for online viewing.

The collection also ranges from restored helicopters—including a Huey and a Cobra that saw action in Vietnam—to letters home from a soldier to his mother in Slaton, Texas. The project's oral history effort has recruited 1,700 participants from all 50 states and 10 countries, including Vietnam. Many recordings are being made at Vietnam veteran reunions across the country.

The university has signed seven cooperation agreements with universities in Vietnam, so that education and research efforts will be far-reaching and comprehensive.

Texas Tech has made a serious commitment to the project. Tech regents have allocated 12 acres for a new facility, and plans call for \$70 million, 191,000-

square-foot headquarters building, including a world-class museum that would look at the Vietnam War from all points of view.

The plans include provisions for Vietnam veteran reunions in the new facility, as well as hosting of national and international conferences.

Dr. Reckner conceived the idea for this project while visiting Gettysburg and seeing a list of names on a monument to Pennsylvania soldiers who died in the 1863 battle.

"The names meant little to me, even though I was born and raised in the same state. I could not identify with them; the monument would not tell me their story," Dr. Reckner said.

"I realized that 100 years from now, the names on the wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington may not mean much to people, even though for those of us who served in Vietnam, the Wall is an intensely emotional reminder of our comrades in arms who did not return from the war," Dr. Reckner says. His idea was to record and preserve the stories of Vietnam survivors, including their memories of those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

We can hope that one lesson of Vietnam has already been learned well. When men and women returned from the jungles of Southeast Asia, they were often vilified and mistreated by opponents of the war. Instead of targeting their opposition appropriately on our civilian leadership, many war opponents took out their frustrations on those who had done their duty.

Happily, conditions are different today. Even most harsh opponents of our involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq are careful to underscore their support for the men and women who serve our country abroad. We now welcome home our volunteer soldiers with open arms, great pride and a deep appreciation for their sacrifices.

There is far more to be learned from our Vietnam experience. I'm proud that Texas Tech is providing a leadership role, creating a national treasure in educating the world about the Vietnam conflict. It will honor the service of our Vietnam veterans and guide us as we face future challenges.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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