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Grade: 11  
Richard Kemper Memorial Contest  
Mrs. Porter—Period 1

### Is America Honoring Her Veterans?

When asked if America is honoring her veterans, the fair answer is probably a debatable “yes.” If, however, the question is, “Are we honoring them *enough*?” the answer has to be an embarrassing “no.”

We should always be mindful of President Kennedy’s statement, “As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” Although many of us are pleased to thank those wearing military uniforms for their service when we bump into them on our streets and in our airports, what else are we *actually* doing for our veterans? As the author Cynthia Ozick once wrote, “We often take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude.” Among all the treasures of America, veterans are probably the most valuable natural resource that Americans take for granted.

Since the time of Plymouth Colony, our country has provided pensions and other limited services to our veterans who became disabled in her defense. America also instituted the GI Bill to assist its Greatest Generation (providing veterans with limited financial support for education and housing) when it returned from World War II. More recently, however, we’ve read about the scandals at Walter Reed Army Medical Center where claims of neglect and deterioration led to the forced resignation of a handful of generals (including the Secretary of the Army) and resulted in numerous government investigations. The media has also reported that today’s military suicide rates are the

highest they have been since records have been kept. Although our nation has done a great deal to honor and care for our veterans in the past, we obviously aren't doing enough for them today and we have to ask ourselves, "Why aren't we doing more?"

It seems that far too many people are disconnected from (or disinterested in) our veterans. This may be because few of our neighbors and politicians seem to have served in the military, or even have veterans in their family. People may be wearing American flag lapel pins in record numbers (which is absolutely a good thing) but how many are wearing pins showing that they have served or have a family member in the service? Without a personal frame of reference or sense of loss, I believe it's difficult to understand and respect the sacrifices of our veterans -- and to honor them appropriately.

I am privileged to have had veterans in my family for generations. In fact, a member of my family has served in almost every armed conflict in which America has been involved. I believe that stories about soldiers landing on the beaches of Normandy have to mean more to you if they are about your great-great uncle. An HBO series about the war in the Pacific is less a matter of mere historical entertainment if your great uncle served at Bougainville, Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, Okinawa and Tarawa and credited his survival with being "lucky" enough to have been wounded early in each of these epic battles. One's sense of history is probably also skewed when your father currently serves in the same New York Army National Guard unit in which his great uncle served during the "War to End All Wars" and then again in World War II. The War on Terror may also seem more relevant and personal when your father is waiting to see when his unit will next be deployed.

They say that those serving in the National Guard are “twice the citizen.” I believe that this applies to all veterans. I was lucky enough to be born in America and, almost by default, am blessed with American citizenship. I have spent my entire life enjoying the freedoms others have obtained and maintained for me. It is not an accident that this country has historically made it easier for immigrants who have honorably served in our military to become citizens. After all, if an individual is willing to forfeit his/her life for America, how can you not honor them with citizenship? But what about the vast majority of those who served and were *already* citizens when they joined up or were drafted? How can we ever sufficiently honor them?

There are certainly many private programs devoted to helping those serving and who have served our country. For instance, an infantry soldier with a traumatic brain injury can reach out to Project Victory. While a National Guardsman is deployed, his daughter’s piano classes can be made possible through Our Military Kids. And although these programs are great, it speaks volumes that they are *privately* funded and operated. I believe we need to expand the resources provided to our military and our veterans as a people and as a country. Our military and our veterans should not need to rely on the charity of private individuals to support themselves and their families.

It may be that the real problem when it comes to honoring our veterans is the collective attitude of the American People. Too many of us apparently feel that America is not at war -- it’s just her military. Where is our collective responsibility *as a Nation*? We must remember that no matter what our opinions on the current war (or any other), these soldiers and sailors are fighting to maintain our freedom, and we must support

them. This issue is not a matter of policy or government; it is a matter of people putting their lives on the line to protect ours.

As in the past, the benefits we give our veterans today are an obvious reflection of the cultural and political views of our military. When a veteran dies, a flag is given to his or her family as a token “on behalf of a grateful nation.” It seems, however, that the “gratefulness” of our nation very much depends on the times. I believe that America can only be said to honor her veterans when, as a country, we fully recognize what veterans have actually given us – the ability to exist as a nation. Although there are many noble forms of public service, it is only the veteran who has left his or her home – sometimes for years at a time – to risk his/her life and *earn* our freedoms. We as a nation are lucky that veterans believe in deeds, not just words. Because I believe we owe so much to veterans, I can only wonder why we aren’t doing more to actually honor them.