The term *selfless service* has a long and honorable history in America. The earliest colonists expected every man to take up arms to defend the settlement and the families therein. Compensation for service was limited to the satisfaction of guaranteeing security for the group. For the next century and more, that was the military system, augmented by packets of British soldiers who recruited a few Americans to fight, for example, in the French and Indian War.

Our Revolutionary War was fought by volunteers, organized and rewarded as each colony thought appropriate, and by a small number who joined GEN George Washington’s Continental Army in return for the promise of payment by the Continental Congress. The failure of Congress to fulfill that promise finally required Washington to personally quell a threatened revolt by his officers who, in 1783, were demanding their long-delayed compensation. They may have been the first who thought “Thank you for your service” is not enough.

All but five of our subsequent wars have been fought by volunteers: the Civil War, when casualties and time dried up the volunteer pools, causing both sides to resort to a draft; World Wars I and II, when the magnitude of the manpower needs required the same solution; Korea, when the manpower policies of World War II were continued; and finally Vietnam, when the personnel policies caused a deterioration that may have ended a resort to draft armies anytime in the future.

With few exceptions (some soldiers became Presidents), the reward for most has been, principally, the satisfaction of passing on to future generations the legacy of freedom created by the long line of military personnel who sacrificed time, livelihood, life and limb.

Also with few exceptions, the veterans of our wars have been treated shabbily, sometimes disgracefully. Mostly they waited long, frustrating years for bonuses, pensions or other rewards while Congress and the states debated...
the need, delayed decisions and waited for most to die before any payments were made. Only the World War II GI Bill had a scope and constancy that rewarded its veterans with education and economic assistance and encouraged a fresh start in life. The country’s reward was “the greatest generation” and a system that should have become a paradigm for all postwar periods.

Unfortunately, Korean War veterans experienced a return to congressional procrastination, and Vietnam War veterans were treated almost as pariahs, for the most part hiding their status. They were further insulted when the draft dodgers of their era were pardoned and accepted back into society as never before. The country’s reward was the high percentage of homeless, unemployed, mentally and physically ill veterans unable to contribute effectively to the nation’s welfare. A detailed and enlightening account of our treatment of veterans from Colonial times to the present is found in the book *Homeward Bound: American Veterans Return From War* by Richard Taylor, available in paperback from the Naval Institute Press.

That said, the values of and needs for selfless service have never diminished, have never been dependent on anticipated rewards, and have continued to epitomize American servicemen and women throughout our history. Its fundamental character is the willingness of individuals to sacrifice themselves for a cause, a mission, a friend or a squad of their peers, engaging without a calculation of consequences. In its ultimate form, it produces Medal of Honor performance, but it is also a factor in the earning of a Bronze Star, a combat badge or a Meritorious Service Medal. It can reflect a sudden, violent instantaneous reaction, or it can be a demonstration of a long period of devoted service. What it cannot be is an action undertaken for an anticipated reward for the individual engaged. Those who seek personal rewards—and conjure means and methods to achieve medals or promotions or enhanced reputations—never understand that the realization of one’s ability to provide for the welfare of others is the primary reward. Medals of Honor are secondary to that reality.

Selfless service is not limited to individuals. Organizations, even nations, commit themselves to causes and missions undertaken for the welfare of others. The United States has no peer in its willingness to react to tragedy or crisis. Earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, fires, floods or terrorism anywhere in the world invoke almost automatic commitment of American assistance, offered without thought of reward, return or even gratitude. More often than not, we go seemingly unrewarded, often criticized as too little, too late by observers who themselves are doing nothing.

But the people being helped know and remember, and our reputation among them is constant, unflagging and no small invitation for them to immigrate. I have not forgotten an exercise in Greece some 30 years after World War II, when anti-Americanism was rife among Greek journalists and government officials. The people in the hinterlands welcomed American troops without qualifications, showered units with fruit and flowers, expressed their appreciation for their liberation and for our help in suppressing the communist revolutionaries as we engaged in the Truman Doctrine response to that threat to their welfare. That same appreciation was pervasive throughout Europe for decades, even among our former enemies, as the effects of the Marshall Plan were enjoyed. It was American selfless service that evoked those reactions, a worthy reward for selfless sacrifice.

For you soldiers engaged today in Iraq and Afghanistan, the same critics and naysayers will have little effect on the people you see every day. Their gratitude will endure, and your reward will be a satisfaction that our traditions are noble and that our next generation will enjoy the legacy of freedom that you will bestow.

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