The Vietnam War made America more reluctant to commit troops to far corners of the world and more respectful of those who return home from service

Lingering echoes of a distant war

Weary after a third night of fighting against North Vietnamese troops, U.S. Marines crawl from foxholes south of the Demilitarized Zone in 1966. The helicopter at left was shot down when it came in to resupply the unit.

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By JOSEPH MORTON ● WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Decades after its end, ragged scars from the Vietnam War still run through American society. ● This Memorial Day comes as the country has been commemorating the 50th anniversary of a conflict that ripped the country apart and undermined the notion of all-powerful U.S. military might. ● By 1973, 40 years ago, America's combat role in the war had ended. The cost was dear, in both blood and treasure — the iconic wall honoring the war's dead bears more than 58,000 names. The financial cost totaled some $111 billion between 1965 and 1975. ● Peter Maslowski, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor emeritus who specializes in U.S. military history, noted that the Vietnam War has been

invoked on both sides of every debate about military action since the conflict ended, from Bosnia to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Opponents always seem to warn that military action will turn into another Vietnam, while those advocating deployment promise that it will be nothing like Vietnam.

"It haunts American foreign policy," Maslowski said.

The conflict arose from the growing Cold War tension with the Soviet Union and concern about the so-called "domino effect" that would come if communism spread.

U.S. involvement started out as simply providing aid, including thousands of advisers. The Gulf of Tonkin incident led to congressional approval of military powers, which President Lyndon Johnson used to order combat forces into battle in Vietnam in 1965.

The number of American military personnel involved in the conflict swelled to more than a half million by its peak. To sustain those troop levels, large numbers of young men were drafted and sent off to fight in jungles on the far side of the world.

Ultimately, millions of U.S. military personnel served in the southeast Asia theater during the war. Many fought valiantly. More than 240 Medals of Honor were awarded to those fighting in Vietnam.

North Vietnam's Tet offensive in 1968 ran counter to U.S. military and civilian leaders' promises that the war was being won, and public opinion increasingly turned against what seemed to have become an endless, bloody stalemate.

The Paris Peace Accords of 1973 eventually ended direct U.S. involve-

Tom, left, and Chuck Hagel served together in Vietnam in 1968. Chuck later called his younger brother "the best soldier I ever served with."

ment in the war.

Some veterans from that era have said they were disrespected upon returning home because of stories about atrocities committed by some U.S. soldiers. Others said they simply received little welcome or recognition for their service at all.

Today, the country takes pains to honor those who return from service in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tom Hagel, a Vietnam veteran, said that goes even for those who have spoken out against those wars.

"One of the few positive things that came out of it is that I think society is now better at separating the war from the warrior," Hagel said. "You can be against a war and still respect the warriors."

Hagel served in Vietnam alongside his brother Chuck, the former Nebraska senator who is now secretary of defense. They were in the same Army squad in Vietnam in 1968, a year that featured some of the war's fiercest fighting. Both were wounded and saved

each other's lives.

Like many Vietnam veterans, when Tom Hagel returned from the war he did everything he could to forget about the military and concentrated on work.

Today, the country has a better sense of its obligation to care for veterans, many of whom bear wounds that might not be readily apparent, he said.

"We're more aware of it now than we certainly were after Vietnam," he said.

Last Memorial Day, Chuck Hagel introduced President Barack Obama

at an event at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. He cited the soldiers he and his brother had served beside.

"These quiet heroes who we slogged through jungles with, fought side by side with, were wounded with, and sometimes helplessly watched die, always considered themselves just ordinary people," Hagel said at the event. "But they were far from ordinary."

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A father holds the body of his child as he talks to South Vietnamese troops. The child was killed as government forces pursued guerrillas into a village near the Cambodian border in 1964.

ON THE COVER

Associated Press photographer Horst Faas captured the soldier with the "War Is Hell" emblem on his helmet at Phouc Vinh airstrip in South Vietnam in 1965. Faas left the now-iconic photo of that war uncaptioned and the face unidentified. But family members' claims, which match up with photographer notes discovered after Faas' death in May 2012, ultimately identified the soldier as Larry Wayne Chaffin from the St. Louis area. Chaffin made it home from the war but struggled to adjust to civilian life. He died Dec. 3, 1985, at the age of 39, from diabetes complications. His family believes the diabetes was a result of his exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliant agent used in Vietnam and linked to multiple health issues. Chaffin is buried at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis.