



## Support Our Troops

Driving to my office this morning, I counted about thirty bumper stickers and car magnets emblazoned with the words “*Support Our Troops.*” Some of them were shaped like yellow ribbons, some like waving flags, and some carried variations on the wording: *Support Our Soldiers*, *Support Our Sailors*, or *Support Our Marines*, but they were all geared toward the same basic message. If you wear a uniform, America has got your back.

Of course, the flags and pro-military decals aren’t as numerous now as they were in the days immediately following 9/11, but there are still plenty of them out there. A lot of people have returned to business-as-usual, but a surprising number continue to fly their flags and display patriotic messages on their clothing and their vehicles.

This must all seem pretty strange to the men and women who served in Vietnam. Their homecoming was an utterly different experience. They weren’t met with handshakes, patriotic bumper stickers, and yellow ribbons. They came home to a climate of open hostility, picketers and jeering crowds. They answered their nation’s call to duty, and instead of gratitude, they received ridicule. They were called *murders* and *baby killers*, and many of them were spat upon by the very citizens they’d sworn to protect. America did *not* have their backs.

I think, or rather I *hope*, that our country has grown up a little over the past few decades. We seem to be learning to separate our feelings about particular military operations from our feelings about our military personnel. During Vietnam, to hate the war was to also hate the warrior. Now, despite growing public resistance to the U.S. military presence in Iraq, many Americans are discovering that they can *hate* the war, and still *love* the men and women who fight it. We’re learning that we can support our troops, even when we don’t fully support the leadership or politics that govern their deployment.

From my perspective, that’s an enormous step in the right direction. I’ve talked to a lot of Vietnam veterans who feel the same way. It’s such a big step for our country that I’m

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His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

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beginning to believe that we're ready for an even bigger one. The bumper stickers and yellow ribbons are a wonderful statement of our collective appreciation, but it's time for the citizens of this country to support our troops with more than words and decals. It's time to translate our messages into actions.

If you want your words of support to *mean* something, do something practical to demonstrate your sincerity. Cards, letters, and care packages to deployed personnel are nearly always welcome. Rare is the Soldier or Sailor who doesn't appreciate opening a box of home baked cookies, music CDs, and paperback novels.

The next time you find yourself in a restaurant with a military family, pick up their check if you can afford it. You don't have even have to identify yourself. Pay their bill when you pay your own, and ask their server to quietly convey your thanks after you've left the restaurant. If your pockets don't extend to an entire meal, ask the manager to send the dessert cart by their table with your compliments.

A lot of military families struggle financially. Drop a \$20.00 gas card, or phone card, or a gift card from your local grocery store in an envelope and mail it to a military family with a short note of thanks. It won't fill up the tank or buy a basket of groceries, but — for a military family in a tight spot — it could mean diapers, baby formula, cough medicine, or the difference between mobility and forced isolation.

If you don't have money to spend, there are a hundred practical things you can do that cost nothing beyond your time and effort. Set an extra place at your dinner table and invite a Marine or Airman over for a home cooked meal. Find a military family in your neighborhood and spend a Saturday morning washing their family car, raking their leaves, or mowing their lawn. Offer a couple of hours of childcare every month or two. If you're handy around the house, have a look at that leaky sink, or fix that wobbly ceiling fan.

You know what your talents are. Put them to work. You don't have to take on any huge responsibilities. Small things make a difference, and when they're done with love and appreciation, they can make a *big* difference. You don't have to do it all the time. A little help here and there goes a long way.

As I write this, the population of the United States is something just short of 300 million people. By contrast, our current troop strength is about 1.4 million. The men and women entrusted with defending this nation account for less than half of one-percent of our total population. Put another way, for every American now wearing the uniform, there are more than two hundred civilian citizens enjoying the blessings of liberty. If each of us does just a little bit to show our appreciation, we can transform our words of support into something real and meaningful. We can make a difference in the lives of our service members, as they make a difference in *our* lives.

A lot of Americans are already doing their part. I know this because my wife and I work with several organizations and quite a few individuals who are dedicated to bringing real support to our military personnel and their families. If you've already taken up the challenge, this old Sailor thanks you. If you haven't given it much thought, or if you've considered doing



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something but haven't gotten around making it happen, consider this your call to arms. *Do* something. Reach out to someone in uniform and *show* your support.

When you glance at the yellow ribbon sticker or magnet on the back of your car or truck, ask yourself if you've done anything lately to live up to the message you're proclaiming to the world. Remember that '*Support Our Troops*' needs to be written on your list of Things-To-Do as well as on your bumper sticker. Remind yourself to demonstrate your gratitude through actions. Otherwise, no matter how sincere or well-intentioned your words may be, they're still just words.

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