

POINTS OF VIEW

Veterans: Clinton crossed line on Russian visit

There are lines in the sand that we don't always know are there. For Vietnam veterans, President Bill Clinton crossed one when he went to Russia to protest the war, just as Jane Fonda did when she traveled to Hanoi.

That's what a group of veterans from suburban Detroit called to tell me after a recent column about Clinton's draft status during the Vietnam War. The column lamented that Clinton was booed when he spoke at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. My contention was that it's time to put all that to rest. I'll stick by it.

But most Vietnam veterans who called can't forget. Their contention isn't that Clinton was in a draft lottery and got out of going to Vietnam, but

that he went to Russia to protest the war. He crossed the line and picked up a case of the Fonda syndrome.

"That's where they were making the guns to shoot at us," one angered veteran said.

It's hard to argue with that. Most Vietnam veterans who called said they understood somebody getting out of going, but couldn't forgive folks like Clinton or Fonda who visited the enemy's camp.

But that's only one of the lines in sand created by the Vietnam war, and those lines linger as baby boomers move into middle age.

There was the issue of who went and who didn't go.

It was best said by Farmington Hills attorney Richard Krandle, 68, a World



JEFF COUNTS

War II veteran.

"There were no riots on college campuses after 1969 because Nixon promised there would be no draft for college men. I remember reading the obituary notices in the newspapers.

Apparently nobody from the Bloomfield Hills were casualties. However, Detroit, Taylor, Westland, Hamtramck, Dearborn and even Livonia boys paid the price. Anybody who opposed that conflict was in the right."

Krandle cuts to the heart of the matter. It was the rich kids who didn't have to go, while the middle class and poor couldn't buy their way out by going to college or going into the National Guard.

And yeah, there were a lot more blacks and southerners who ended up in Vietnam than kids from Detroit's suburbs.

No, it wasn't fair. It was tragic that these guys were over represented, but it really is time to move on.

It's hard though. One veteran told

me that on returning home from Vietnam he was met at Metro Airport by protesters extending the All-American middle finger greeting.

That's the sort of thing that burns into the brain of a 20 year old who has just spent a year being shot at. It's the reason he doesn't forget and the reason he can't accept Clinton as president. It could have been Clinton extending that special greeting.

It's no wonder Vietnam veterans can't forget. And it's too bad we all can't.

Jeff Counts is the editor of the Plymouth and Canton Observer Newspapers who was lucky not to have to go to Vietnam, but didn't visit Russia.

Privatize high school sports and save academics

Most homeowners are continually bombarded during school millage campaigns by statements that the fate of western civilization depends on the millage proposal being approved and the high school sports program being continued.

In many cases, the millages are rejected — sometimes by large margins — because of the community's demographics. About 70 percent to 75 percent of households in most suburbs don't have kids in school. Of the remaining few, only a small percentage have sons or daughters in varsity athletic programs.

Some school officials have commented privately to journalists that the sports program is vital to only a few boys who otherwise would drop out.

Frankly, it's bad policy to spend big general fund bucks for a program that is used by only a handful of people.

But if the sports program is that valuable to parents and student ath-

letes, here is a simple proposal that should be supported by the entire community and school officials: Privatize the sports programs and let the participants and their parents pay all the expenses.

For example, most suburbs have a Little League or Youth Athletic Association that sponsors football, baseball, softball and hockey teams for boys and girls.

Let these groups expand their programs to include varsity competition for high school athletes and charge the participants for the expenses.

The beauty of this concept is that it eliminates those big bucks from the school board budget while still offering opportunities for athletes.

If the concept is supported, local teams should retain their school nickname.

Nothing else would be changed on the field of competition.

The only difference is that a private



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group would be offering the program for the public schools, which would set the standards and conditions under a binding written agreement.

Some districts have privatized their bus and food programs to offer the services at a lower cost and eliminate a general fund subsidy.

Hopefully, if the same is done for athletics, there would be continued support from the Michigan High School Athletic Association to main-

tain the state tournament system for major sports.

If the sports community is right in saying that the private athletic associations are growing annually, then their taking over the high school varsity programs shouldn't be a problem.

This financial lesson was learned years ago by many municipal governments who stopped subsidizing local recreation programs by raising users' fees. If participants resisted the higher fees, then city officials concluded that the program wasn't that valuable in the first place.

Telephone companies also learned the financial facts of life in revising their charges so that services are paid for by the users and not subsidized by others.

It's time that school boards get smart and learn that there are different ways to provide popular but limited-use non-academic programs. Why not

give it a try?

After all, employers interviewing high school students for jobs don't want better football or basketball players. They want employees who can communicate verbally and in writing, compute, solve problems and work together as a group.

While sports helps students learn some skills used in later life, there are cheaper ways to achieve the same results.

At least privatizing sports programs would eliminate the "we've got to have sports" argument in future millage campaigns.

Leonard Poger is editor of the Garden City and Westland Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. To leave a message for him, dial 953-2107.

Teacher unions not corrupt but they need to be curbed

Is it possible? Can such things be?

Can the National Education Association be as corrupt as Forbes Magazine portrays it in the June 7 edition — with the cover picture of an apple with a yucky worm crawling out?

Forbes brands NEA president Keith Geiger, technically still on leave as a Livonia math teacher, and his team the "Michigan Mafia." It quotes a Michigan source as calling NEA the "National Extortion Association," failing to note it came from a leader of Michigan's religious right.

Forbes accused NEA, parent of the MEA and nearly all local teachers unions, of "left-wing looneyism" and described it as a political superpower. It noted MEA has a subsidiary that sells health insurance to school districts — whether they want that brand or not.

I asked two prominent state Republicans if they had read the article.

GOP chair Dave Doyle liked the way Forbes detailed how NEA spends its sums on one party. He said the GOP has "strong differences" with MEA. But when I asked him flat out if MEA is "evil," he ducked. Later he said MEA "worked well with the governor on Proposal A," the failed June 2 school tax measure.

Gov. John Engler likewise refused to throw mud at MEA. Although it never has supported his candidacies, he said he had received support from many individual educators. MEA fought his 1992 Proposal C property tax cut, but Engler added MEA "worked hard to pass Proposal A and did everything they said they would do."

Inside Michigan Politics, Bill Ballenger's newsletter, surveyed political watchers on the best and worst lobbies in Lansing for its May 24 edition.

MEA ranked No. 5 on the good list, behind the Chamber of Commerce, Governmental Consultant Services, Public Affairs Association, Jimmy Karoub's firm, and well ahead of the Trial Lawyers and the AFL-CIO.

On the bad list MEA was No. 4 behind Noble Rhoder, Jimmy Karoub and the Chamber. So in Geiger's home state, the teachers union is nowhere near as formidable as Forbes paints it. Readers know I'm no big fan of the teachers union, but one must be fair.

Forbes plays dirty when it links the rise of teacher unionism with declining test scores. It hints at a cause-and-effect relationship, but never even tries to prove it.

Forbes exaggerates the teachers union's strength, at least in Michigan. Last August, for example, MEA batted zero for five in trying to nominate candidates at the Democratic State Convention. The UAW, AFSCME and AFL-CIO still run Democratic politics with an iron hand.

Forbes' own agenda is extremely conservative: the voucher system, a pet project of the religious right, and "right to work" laws, a Dixie darling. My guess is that 80 percent of Michiganders don't buy either notion.



TIM RICHARD

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Forbes plays dirty by comparing average teachers' salaries in a district to average local wages. Whoa! Someone with a master's degree in science deserves a bit more than a canning plant worker.

A more valid way to show the union's avarice would be to compare the percentage increase in teachers salaries to the increase in gross domestic product.

If NEA/MEA is no hobgoblin, it does deserve to be curbed.

First, under my government, no member of an MEA affiliate could be a public school board or public college trustee until five years after leaving school employment. Yes, teachers unions have captured many school boards and do bargain on both sides of the table.

Second, we should head Engler and make school districts put out health insurance for competitive bidding rather than letting MEA force schools to deal with its subsidiary.

Third, teachers unions donate to one party although 40 percent of their members vote the other way. Curbing NEA/MEA would be a major campaign reform.

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events. His office phone is (313) 349-1700.

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