

**Testimony to Senate Committee On Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
Regarding HB 2880
May 9, 2017**

Chair Boquist and members of the Committee,

My name is John Calhoun and I am a resident of Southwest Portland. I am here today in opposition to HB 2880 on my own behalf, but I believe I represent many Vietnam veterans who do not support this bill. I do want to thank you for giving me this chance to testify since I could not be here last week when the public hearing was scheduled.

I served in Vietnam during 1969 and 1970 where I was an artillery officer in the First Infantry Division and later the 2nd Field Force. I spent time on combat patrols with the infantry as a forward observer and at fire bases as a fire direction officer and battery executive officer. I participated in the Cambodian invasion 47 years ago this month. I was awarded two Bronze Stars for my service.



The POW/MIA flag does not represent me. I have always found this flag to be disturbing. It was created in 1971 while there were still prisoners of war in Hanoi to ensure that those prisoners would not be forgotten in the peace settlement. However the flag as a symbol was soon taken over by Nixon to rally support for his handling of the war. **Once the prisoners were returned in 1973 the flag was then exploited by people who could not accept an end to the war.** They created a myth that the government had betrayed our soldiers and left prisoners behind just as it had betrayed the military by not conducting the war more aggressively. We could have won the war if we hadn't been betrayed they claimed.

There were tens of thousands of MIA's in WWII and Korea, but nobody assumed there was a plot to ignore prisoners held after those wars or hide what happened to the missing. The activists behind this flag held up normalization with Vietnam and made life difficult for Senators Kerry and McCain who were trying to re-establish relations with Vietnam and actually figure out what happened to the MIA's. Long after it was clear that there were no POW's left behind the activists kept claiming they were there. **Over time**

the flag became a symbol of defiance against the government just like the Confederate flag.

The motorcycle group, Rolling Thunder, still claims that soldiers were left behind in Vietnam. (*“Though many bikers ride to remember friends, family or all who died in war, Rolling Thunder was founded in 1987 to advance a specific crackpot belief: that successive Republican and Democratic administrations have concealed evidence that American captives are being held alive in South-East Asia. Even now, many believe this.”* The Economist May 2014.)

For many of us who fought in Vietnam, but did so without illusion or hostility toward the Vietnamese, the POW/MIA flag remains disturbing. It is not a symbol of unity, but of divisiveness. I cannot see it without having a negative reaction. At the same time, I also realize that for many, including many Vietnam vets, the flag represents a pledge that the military will not leave any of its members behind in combat.

However, you should think about the precedent you are setting by mandating that one group’s flag be flown at all public buildings even if we acknowledge that many veterans support this action. While it may be appropriate at an American Legion hall, why is it appropriate at a public library, fire station, or school building? It is after all a military symbol. **Should we also fly a Peace flag for those who have a different view? Should we fly the rainbow flag to honor our diversity?** Why should the State of Oregon require any flag be flown beyond the State Flag? **How are you going to respond when another group makes an impassioned request that their flag be flown at public buildings.**

Flying this flag at schools is especially troublesome. The flag itself is stark and dark. Do you really want elementary children seeing this daily? Will parents be upset when they find out the flag must be flown at their school?

It also does not represent all veterans. We suffered 58,000 deaths in the Vietnam war, over 150,000 wounded and 2.5 million served there, but only 1,611 are MIA and fewer than 800 were held prisoner. How does this flag represent the sacrifices of the much larger group?

I am sure that most members of the House and Senate think that passing this bill will be seen as supporting veterans and a chance to do something that will be seen as bipartisan. I disagree. I may be in the minority, but I am not alone. This flag keeps the wounds of the Vietnam War open and makes healing more difficult. Of all the symbols that could be raised to permanently join the American and Oregon state flags this is not the one.

In spite of my concerns with this issue, I support our military and my fellow vets. I just believe that there are better ways to do this. I am hoping that this committee will not support HB 2880.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.