

December 7, 1981

THE VIETNAM MEMORIAL

INTRODUCTION

With the enactment July 1, 1980, of Senate Joint Resolution 119, authorizing the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Fund to establish a memorial "...in honor and recognition of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in Vietnam," it appeared that at long last the U.S. would pay tribute to the 2.7 million Americans who fought in Southeast Asia. The broad support for building such a monument was demonstrated by the fact that 196 Members of the House and all 100 Senators co-sponsored the law. In short order, the VVMF assembled an impressive list of project sponsors ranging from Bob Hope, the perennial champion of GI's, to George McGovern, one of the Vietnam War's harshest critics.

For the Vietnam veteran, authorization of a memorial was of special importance. In contrast to his World War II and Korean War predecessors, the Vietnam veteran came home to no triumphal welcome. In too many instances, he was received with hostility and ostracism. At worst, his contemporaries viewed him as some sort of wanton destroyer who supported a corrupt and repressive regime. At best, he was simply ignored. No one thanked him.

The media also made reintegration of the Vietnam veterans difficult by constantly portraying them as drug-crazed walking time bombs. This characterization has been used so frequently that it has now become a Hollywood cliché -- despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Vietnam veterans have proved themselves responsible, productive members of their communities. Negative characterizations simply have reinforced the subtle prejudices which militate against the complete assimilation of the Vietnam veteran into the American mainstream. Is it thus any wonder that many Vietnam veterans monitored the progress of the VVMF with anxious anticipation of the day when their sacrifice

would receive the same tribute and recognition as that of veterans of prior conflicts?

Recognition is well-deserved. The average combat veteran of a year in Southeast Asia saw more actual fighting than the World War II G.I. who fought in every major campaign in Europe. U.S. troops in Vietnam had one of the lowest desertion rates in American military history and fought in one of the roughest climates ever experienced by Americans.

THE DESIGN OF THE MONUMENT

The most traditional means of designing a national monument has been to choose a noted architect or sculptor to execute it. The design of the Vietnam veteran's memorial, however, was selected by a national competition. Designs were judged by a blue-ribbon panel, with the winner receiving a \$20,000 prize. Money was raised from the public and few problems arose until the design selection was announced.

The selection panel chose the proposal of Maya Ying Lin, a Yale undergraduate. Her design consists of two 200-foot long horizontal walls of black granite, forming a "V." The top of the walls are level with the ground, and the inside of the "V" is at the bottom of a five degree incline so that only that portion is exposed. Those killed or missing in Vietnam are to be listed on the ten-foot high exposed portion in chronological order of their death or disappearance.

Almost as soon as the design was announced, controversy erupted. The Washington Post characterized the design as "a black rift in the earth." Tom Carhart, a decorated combat veteran, called it a "black gash of shame and sorrow." Other veterans expressed similar dismay at "the black trench." Contributors to the memorial fund were also taken aback. The VVMF was to be supported solely through private contributions solicited through direct mail. All solicitation letters were of a general nature, stressing patriotic themes and the need to pay some sort of tribute to the Vietnam veteran. By and large, contributors expected that a conventional design would be selected and that the design would honor the living as well as the dead. Many who learned of the stark nature of the proposed monument thus feel that they have been misled.

Those involved in the design's selection quickly rallied to its support. An official of the Fine Arts Commission, one of the agencies which approved the design, called it "a suitable, dignified, and understated type of memorial." In a letter to the Marine Corps League, Robert W. Doubek, Executive Director of the VVMF, stated that the memorial "...makes a powerful statement that this society pays tribute to Vietnam Veterans."

A MEMORIAL FOR WHOM?

Many veterans, however, seriously question how the memorial is supposed to pay them tribute. Not only does the memorial lack the traditional symbols normally found on monuments erected to veterans, but nowhere on the Vietnam veteran's memorial is there any indication that the nation is grateful or appreciative to those who fought. The prologue inscribed before the list of honor states simply:

In honor of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in Vietnam. The names of those who gave their lives, and of those who remain missing, are inscribed in the order they were taken from us.

This inscription fails even to include the minimal language of the law authorizing the memorial to be in "honor and recognition." The epilogue following the names uses the same minimalist tone:

Our nation remembers the courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty of its Vietnam veterans.

These inscriptions contrast sharply with other memorials. To many veterans of the Vietnam conflict, the language of the memorial seems but one more manifestation of the fact that they are an uncomfortable reminder for many Americans of a conflict which they would like to forget.

C. L. Kammeier, Executive Director of the Marine Corps League, wrote to the VVMF: "...there appears to be a general consensus that nothing in the design represents the purpose of the commitment of those who served and survived the Vietnam experience. The [sic] particular common sense criticism is based on the fact that none volunteered to serve their country in Vietnam for the express purpose of dying or to ultimately have their name engraved on a tombstone; as represented by the current design of the memorial. Most readily agreed, however, that duty, honor, and country were the main motivating factors toward their service...."

The notion that the Vietnam veteran memorial, as currently designed, is a monument only to the dead particularly offends veterans. The congressional mandate is quite clear in calling for a memorial for those "who served in Vietnam." According to VVMF guidelines for those submitting designs, however,

the purpose of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is to recognize and honor those who served and died. It will provide a symbol of acknowledgement of the courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty of those who were among the nation's finest youth. Whether they served because of their belief in war policy, their belief in their obligation to answer the call of their country, or

their simple acquiescence in a course of events beyond their control, their service was no less honorable than that rendered by Americans in any previous war. Those who served and died embodied values and ideals prized by this nation since its inception. The failure of the nation to honor them only extends the national tragedy of our involvement in Vietnam.

While the phrase "served and died" might have been unintentional, other evidence also points to an intention to honor only the dead. In a article published in the Washington Post on May 25, 1977, VVMF President Jan Scruggs stated: "No effort can provide compensation, of course, to the Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice in Viet Nam. For them, perhaps, a national monument is in order to remind an ungrateful nation of what it has done to its sons."

Other aspects of the design also are being criticized. A principal complaint, for example, is the choice of black granite as the material for the memorial. Black normally is associated with death and dishonor. While a number of other war memorials use some black stone, it generally is for heroic figures, rising from the earth. The Vietnam veteran's memorial, however, is not just black, but also descends into the ground, further reinforcing the image of a "tomb."

Another complaint is that the memorial will be relatively inaccessible to wheelchair-bound veterans; some 75,000 Vietnam veterans are permanently disabled. When queried about this by the Army Times, Jan Scruggs stated: "I hadn't even thought of that." According to Robert Doubek, Executive Director of the VVMF, artificial turf may be installed to make wheelchair access somewhat easier and at least would meet Park Service minimum requirements for access by the disabled.

Listing of the names of the dead and missing in chronological order also is being criticized. Although this may be of some symbolic value, it will make it extremely difficult for family members to locate the name of a relative. Present plans call for a directory of names in a closed pavilion near the memorial's entrance. The directory is to be in the form of a rotating card file. This means that when large numbers of visitors come to the monument, which is very likely during the summer months, there will be a great deal of inconvenience. Any mechanical breakdown in the file's mechanism, moreover, could make it impossible to look up a name. It would seem preferable to list the names alphabetically.

Other criticisms of the design include that it readily lends itself to graffiti. It also has been suggested that the memorial may present a hazard at night since visitors unfamiliar with the park might inadvertently fall off the upper level.

The most telling complaint is that nowhere at the memorial site will there be the Stars and Stripes, the flag under which the Vietnam veteran fought. It is on this issue more than any other that the veterans seeking changes seem to agree. As C. L. Kammeier stated in his letter to the VVMF:

for the sake of the many non-artists who have served their country under the standard American symbol of duty, honor, and country, in every war since our nation was founded, as represented by our flag; I suggest that your committee make every effort to include the flag in a suggested modification to the current design, or even scrap the current design altogether and reopen the bidding for a selection by a committee comprised of at least several members who have actually served in Vietnam.

The extent and vehemence of the opposition to the design selected raises questions about the process of the selection. One brochure used by the VVMF to solicit entries for the design competition states: "It was the longest war in our nation's history, and the most unpopular. Not since the Civil War has any issue so divided Americans. Although many of our present problems such as inflation and lack of confidence in our institutions have been attributed to the war, the average citizen has eliminated it from his consciousness. Any discussions of Vietnam tend to recall the bitter and seemingly unresolvable debate over whether the U.S. should have become involved militarily in Southeast Asia and subsequently how the war was conducted."

The brochure goes on to describe the experiences of the Vietnam veteran as "horror, bitterness, boredom, heat, exhaustion, and death" and states "because of inequities in the draft system, the brunt of dangerous service fell upon the young, often the socially and economically disadvantaged." It is not until the fourth paragraph that the brochure discusses the memorial. And there the emphasis is on the negative aspects of the Vietnam conflict, ending with what is surely, at best, an extremely questionable statement: "The failure of the nation to honor them only extends the national tragedy of our involvement in Vietnam."

Ironically, after thus restating most of the anti-war charges, and describing the conflict as a national tragedy, the brochure adds that "The memorial will make no political statement regarding the war or its conduct." Many veterans, however, regard the lack of any statement about the role of the American serviceman in defending the freedom of the Vietnamese people as a political statement of the strongest kind: a statement that their war was a meaningless sacrifice. It is this, perhaps which triggers the most strong feelings about the memorial. Given the rhetoric of the brochure, it is understandable why the designs entered conveyed a negative feeling about the Vietnam conflict.

Throughout the materials for those submitting designs and on which the jury was to make its selection, an anti-heroic theme was stressed. Is it surprising that an anti-heroic design was selected? To make matters worse, not a single Vietnam veteran sat on the selection jury. Indeed the jury contained at least one anti-war activist, and several members were strongly opposed to the war.

Had there been a broader participation by Vietnam veterans, the anti-heroic nature of the design might have been modified, or even rejected. Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of the selection is that rather than fulfilling the goal that "the memorial will begin a healing process, a reconciliation of the grievous divisions wrought by the war," it has added yet another element of controversy to one of the most controversial episodes in our history.

Milton R. Copulos
Policy Analyst

Milton R. Copulos is a disabled veteran of two tours of duty in Vietnam where he served with elements of the 25th Infantry Division. He holds the Bronze Star Medal among other decorations.