

To Do or To Suffer:

The Changing Focus of American Memorials

Brian Abel Ragen

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as designed by Mia Linn is now, by common consent, one of the most popular and moving of America's public monuments. It is one of the most visited sites in Washington. It is now a genuine shrine, hallowed by years of visits by veterans, including the annual Rolling Thunder Motorcycle rally, by the bereaved seeking the names of their dead, and by Americans with no personal ties to the war in Vietnam trying to find a way to make a connection to the event that divided America more than any since the Civil War. And what was the initial response of Vietnam veterans to the Wall, as we often call it? They hated it. If we look at their reasons for objecting to it and how they transformed it into The National Vietnam Memorial instead of Mia Linn's Vietnam Memorial, I think we will learn something about how American culture has been changing its idea of what makes someone worthy of memorialization in the years since World War II.

Linn famously said that "in a city of white monuments ascending," she proposed a black monument receding. In her original design, the monument consisted solely of the black granite panels facing a wall that sloped down from ground-level to an apex with the names of all the dead and missing of the Vietnam era. It did not include any other sort of inscription. Veterans' groups objected. Not to the listing of the names—rolls of honor have been part of American memorials since the Civil War, at least, as one can see from a visit to Memorial Chapel at Harvard or the Memorial Room that is the central space in Princeton's Nassau hall. It was that it presented them only as the dead. Not as the

glorious fallen or even those who had died doing something, but just as the dead. It seemed to have more in common with the obelisks found in many American cemeteries commemorating the victims of nineteenth century cholera epidemics than with any military memorial. It suggested that it was only their deaths that mattered, not their service.

In response to their objections, several elements have been added to the memorial. First, an inscription. At the beginning of the list of names, it reads “IN HONOR OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR. THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES AND OF THOSE WHO REMAIN MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THEY WERE TAKEN FROM US” and at the end, “OUR NATION HONORS THE COURAGE, SACRIFICE AND DEVOTION TO DUTY AND COUNTRY OF ITS VIETNAM VETERANS. THIS MEMORIAL WAS BUILT WITH PRIVATE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE. NOVEMBER 11, 1982.” Second, an American Flag. (The veterans present on the dedication weekend erected the first one; the National Arts Commission only made one a permanent part of the memorial two years later.) Third, and most importantly, a statue by sculptor Frederick Hart of three infantrymen rendered in exquisite detail. They represent the racial diversity of the American army, but they are clearly individuals, and they are presented with uniforms and equipment that the real “grunts” of the Vietnam era wore and carried, from the M-16 down to the bottle of bug-juice tucked into the band around one of the soldiers’ helmets. And finally, a statue that was added to the memorial years after the monument’s dedication as a tribute to the women who served in Vietnam. It depicts one nurse kneeling over a wounded soldier and another looking to the sky—because she is praying to God or waiting for the evacuation

chopper or both.

Had these other elements been placed in the center of the v-shaped wall Linn designed, they would have ruined it. It would have become merely the background for the sculptural figures. Wisely, they were placed at some little distance and off the main axis of the memorial. They are nevertheless fully a part of it, and from some angles one can see both the statue and the wall. In fact, an early commentator on the wall who noted the “thousand-yard stare” that many combat veterans found one of the most realistic parts of Hart’s statue, said, “It is as if they are looking for their own names.” They are placed so that they seem to be gazing at the apex of the wall.

Why did these changes make the memorial acceptable to the veterans groups? Because, I think, they showed the soldiers *as* soldiers and not *simply* as victims. They made it the Vietnam *Veterans* Memorial; not just the memorial to the dead and missing. They suggested, in other words, that the memorial was meant to honor the actions and sacrifices of those who served, and not just to lament the deaths of those who were killed. The figures, while not exactly heroic—though they are slightly larger than life—are *active*. They show infantrymen and nurses doing their duty and added the vertical element that Linn had consciously avoided. The bronze statues that rose within sight of the black receding wall say, “While we lament their deaths, we *honor* their deeds.”

While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was transformed so as to accommodate the sensibilities and sensitivities of the veterans groups, the trend in American memorials is in the direction of Linn’s original idea. It is victims, not heroes, we commemorate. We recall what people have *suffered*, not what they have *done*.

Consider what the great American memorials from the era before World War II

look like. I am sure we would all count the works of Augustus St-Gaudens honoring the Union leaders of the Civil War in that category. I will focus on two, one in New York and one in Boston. In Grand Army Plaza at the base of Central Park, we see the statue of General Sherman, now once again splendidly gilded. The general, with his craggy face as St.-Gaudens had sculpted from life, rides a great horse with his cape billowing behind him. The horse is led by a female figure of Victory holding a palm-branch for peace. The message is clear: we honor, in the center of the great metropolis, the real man who brought it peace by seeking victory unremittingly. It honors the man, his achievement, and his cause.

Still more famous, perhaps, is St.-Gaudens's statue of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment on Boston Common. We probably all know it from an overrated poem—"For the Union Dead"—by Robert Lowell and an under-rated movie—Glory—by Edward Zwick. In St.-Gauden's memorial, a deep relief, we see Colonel Gould not as the victim of overwhelming odds in the attack on Fort Wagner. His achievement is shown instead. He rides as colonel beside his men—and that, after all, was his great achievement: leading armed black men into battle in the uniform of their country.

Other monuments to those who fought in the Civil War era also take more the form of tributes to heroism than of laments for loss. One thinks of the statues of the leaders of the Confederacy on Monument Avenue in Richmond and of the Lincoln Memorial, where the weapons he used to defend his country—his words—are hung like trophies in bronze on the wall of the Greek temple in which he sits enthroned. And in towns across America, one can see statues of a generic infantryman standing erect in the

court square, honored not because he fell, but because he fought.

In wondering when the focus of American memorials began to shift from actors to sufferers, I first thought to date the change from the Vietnam era. But I think it was actually under way long before that. The shift, I think, began with the mass casualties of World War I, many of whom were never identified. While one can find plenty of statues of General Pershing across America, World War I also gave us the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which is moving in its simplicity and the dignity with which the honor guard carries out its duties, but lacks the sort of tributes to victory or heroism earlier monuments have. It is, of course, modeled on British post-war monuments. While the British erected statues of many generals and filled churches with memorials showing infantrymen and aviators as knights fighting a new crusade, they also entombed the first unknown warrior and built to Edward Lutyens design the Cenotaph, the “empty tomb” in Whitehall. It is not a monument to victory, but to loss. The solemnity with which Remembrance Sunday is still celebrated there each year has almost no note of triumph—as least not until the Queen, the ambassadors, and the bishops leave and the veterans begin their quick-time march past. In the poem Kipling wrote on its dedication, he focused on loss and included no mention of victory:

When you come to London Town,
(Grieving-grieving!)
Bow your head and mourn your own,
With the others grieving.

For those minutes, let it wake
(Grieving-grieving!)
All the empty-heart and ache
That is not cured by grieving.

For those minutes, tell no lie:
(Grieving-grieving!)

"Grave, this is thy victory;
And the sting of death is grieving."

(Kipling's own son, of course, had fallen on his first day in battle, and his resting place was not identified until many decades after his father's death.) After World War I, America began creating military cemeteries in the form we now know them. Instead of many different figurative monuments, many alluding to victory as well as loss, such as the ones to be found at the Gettysburg, Arlington, and the other cemeteries of the Civil War, each grave was marked with an identical white stone or cross, differing only in the names, the dates, the cross or Star of David, and, vary rarely, the gold lettering for the medal of honor winner. The impression left by these crosses row on row—to use McCrae's phrase from "In Flander's Fields"—is much more of loss than of triumph, even as the dead seem to keep their ordered places in the rank and file of a mighty host.

In the World War II era, there were still monuments to victory. But even they were often not to the great man who would have been honored by earlier generations. (There are statues of MacArthur and Eisenhower here and there, but none have really caught the public imagination.) Probably the best-remembered of the figural memorials is the U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial, which one passes on the way from Washington to Arlington. It reproduces in bronze the famous photograph of five Marines and one Navy Corpsman raising the flag on Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima. It is a monument to victory and to courage—and it is perhaps the last memorial of its kind. Hart's sculpture at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial shows courage as endurance, rather than triumph, and the figures at the much less effective Korean War Memorial seem almost lost as they march in their v-shaped patrol.

Still more significantly, the National World War II Memorial on the mall, which was just opened, has no heroic figures. While it is full of the sort of white ascending elements that Mia Linn avoided, it is clearly constructed in the spirit of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and of Lutyen's cenotaph before that. There are pillars for America's states and territories with memorial wreaths. There are pavilions for the Atlantic and Pacific theaters of war. There is a baldachino where eagles hold a wreath. But those who fought are represented not as standing soldiers or even as names. Instead there is a wall, rising above the earth instead of sinking into it, with a field of four thousand stars, one for every hundred men killed in the war. Despite the inscription, "HERE WE MARK THE PRICE OF FREEDOM," the impression is that it is the loss, not the victory, that is our focus.

And I think loss—perhaps meaningless loss—rather than triumph has come to be the central note in American memorials. If, since Vietnam, our soldiers—even those of earlier eras--have seemed to have died for nothing or to have paid too high a price even for a great victory, others whom we wish to remember have won no victory at all. Think of the monument to the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. They are remembered by a field of empty chairs. That's a good image for a group of office workers murdered while going about the public's business, but it is not heroic. Think of the AIDS quilt, and other monuments that Americans have found moving: it marks the same sort of loss as those cholera obelisks—meaningless death. And we will soon see quarrels probably as bitter as those over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial breaking out over the memorials to 9/11. I suspect that the police and firefighters will demand some figural memorial to the heroism of their comrades—and perhaps we will see something similar for those who kept the fourth plane from hitting its intended target. But the main body of any memorial

will be the equivalent of the names, stars, and chairs that honor not heroes, but the victims and human malice and folly.

Brian Abel Ragen, Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, can be contacted at inquiries@brianableragen.net. He retains copyright to this essay.