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Memorializing the Vietnam War: Reflecting the Past and Looking Toward the Future

The Vietnam War was one of the most controversial events in American history. The time of the Vietnam War was a time clouded by disillusion, confusion, and stark division. Just a few of the dismal connections that come to mind when one recalls the war are the widespread, angry anti-war strikes led by the young adults in America, the spread of communism, the Watergate scandal, and the American loss in the war. Even today, the American government's entry into war is widely viewed as an egregious misstep, one that should never be taken again in the future. But there are always at least two sides to every story, and in this case, the story of the battlefield had been lost amidst the controversy. What of the American men and women who witnessed death and violence and destruction on a daily basis, who risked and gave up their lives fighting for freedom, or against communism, or, on a darker note, a "rich man's war?" What of the South Vietnamese soldiers who fought hopelessly alongside the Americans, the citizens who watched their homeland being destroyed to pieces, who lost their families, who picked up what little they had left and fled from their homes to a land, an "America" unknown? The war and the U.S. entry into the war might have been wrong from the start, but the sorrowful pain and memory of those who lost their lives, soldiers and citizens, American and Vietnamese alike was something that could possibly be reconciled with, honored, and healed with time.

This process of honoring and healing, however, would prove to be no easy task. When the American soldiers came home from the war, they were met with an unwelcoming American public because of their immediate connection to the highly unpopular war. Returning soldiers

were not at all recognized or respected for the sacrifices they made, because many directly linked their existence to the American government's controversial engagement in the Vietnam War. The American public's reception of the war and its veterans was also marked by a sense of scorn towards the veterans for failing to win the war, as well as a strong desire to forget the war in general (An 24). After Vietnam, Americans lost their "persuasive confidence that American arms and aims were linked somewhat to justice and morality, not merely to the quest for power" (Dickstein qtd. in An). In regards to the South Vietnamese refugees, the U.S. government initially attempted to "minimize the impact of refugees on the local communities" by dispersing them throughout the nation in hopes that they would quickly assimilate into the mainstream American culture rather than clump¹ together and form their own segregated ethnic communities (Zhou). It is clear that a resentful and bitter aura still clung to the sphere of America, and uncertainty clouded the issue of dealing with the influx of South Vietnamese refugees. The overall lack of reception and acknowledgement of both the war veterans and South Vietnamese refugees was a major obstacle that needed to be overcome when the first desire to memorialize the Vietnam War came about. The two memorials that thoroughly exemplify this process of honoring and healing and that will be the focus of this paper are the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. and the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster, California.

These two Vietnam War memorials exemplify the concept, as argued by several scholars, that the very act of memorialization reflects how the way in which a society views and wants to view a certain memory, in this case, the memory of the Vietnam War. There were many factors that were taken into consideration during the creation process of each memorial, including the design and architecture, what to include and what to exclude, what kind of message the memorial

¹ However, clump they did, as accounted for later in this paper.

should convey about the war. Though the two war memorials commemorate the same historic conflict and event, they do so in different ways, as seen in the differences in their architectural design, specifically the wall, the sculptures, and the flags, as well as the differences in their name. As a result, each memorial conveys a different message about the memory of the war and resultant outlook on the future, messages that are telling of how each respective society wants and chooses to commemorate the war and its veterans. While the architectural elements of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial provides a purely American, nationalistic view of the war as an event that was, and still is, an event clouded by controversy and lack of closure, the Vietnam War Memorial portrays a more united front, one that indicates a firm desire to acknowledge the sacrifices of both Americans and South Vietnamese, allowing for a sense of acceptance and more closure. Despite these different messages, the two memorials do share a common purpose: they both commemorate the past while also serving as symbols of the ongoing struggle of healing and remembering for the future.

Before delving into an analysis of these memorials themselves, one must have an understanding of the process of memorialization and the societal implications of memorials. There are a significant number of scholars engaged in the conversation about memorialization, all of whom are essentially in accord about the functions of a memorial. Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz summarize this concept by drawing from other scholars' academic perspectives, noting that they all "emphasize the way commemorative monuments integrate the glory of society's past into its present concerns and aspirations" (379). Kristin Hass reinforces this perspective, arguing that "a memorial gives shape to and consolidates public memory: it makes history" (10). She goes on to quote historian James Mayo, who argues that "how the past is commemorated through a country's war memorials mirrors what people want to remember, and lack of attention reflects

what they wish to forget” (qtd. in Hass 10). All these perspectives converge at the idea that memorialization is very much an interpretive process that involves many carefully thought-out steps, including considering the location of the memorial, the surrounding community, what elements – statues, fountains, walls, flags, monuments, inscriptions – to include or exclude, which sculptor or designer to select, and what message to convey, just to name a few. As Mayo points out, the elements that are included or excluded in a memorial convey a sound message about the purpose of the memorial. By acknowledging the many factors that go into the final product of a memorial, both general audiences and scholars alike can draw conclusions about how a memorial reflects the views of a community or governmental entity on a certain event and how they want that that event to be remembered in the future.

In 1979, four years after the end of the Vietnam War, the idea to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. was born. Even though this was four years after the war’s end, tensions surrounding the war still ran high. The American public still showed complete ignorance towards the sacrifice of the veterans. Post-war media’s and films’ portrayal of veterans as “losers, victims, drug addicts, or psychopaths” worsened the veterans’ image in the public eye (An 24). Because of the lack of support from the American people, Vietnam veterans were forced to build a memorial for themselves in order to gain recognition in the American public eye. The project got off to a rocky start with only a few meager donations from other veterans and their families, but it slowly garnered more support, financial and otherwise, over the course of a year. Jan C. Scruggs, a Vietnam War veteran and the founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, envisioned a monument that would honor the Vietnam veterans alone, not the controversial war that was associated with them, and begin the healing process for fellow veterans and their families. Much deliberation went into the selection of the design of the

memorial, whose criteria required “(1) that it be reflective and contemplative in character, (2) that it harmonize with its surroundings, especially the neighboring national memorials, (3) that it contain the names of all who died or remain missing, and (4) that it make no political statement about the war” (Vietnam Veterans). These requirements highlight the memorial committee’s, comprised of white Vietnam veterans, desire to commemorate only the American veterans and not the war itself. The chosen design was that of Maya Ying Lin, a twenty-one-year old Chinese-American architecture student at Yale. The monument, which is embedded within a park of the Constitution Gardens, was dedicated in 1982, and its most prominent features consist of a long, highly polished, black granite wall, engraved with the names of all the war veterans who died in battle or still remained missing, a sculpture depicting three typical U.S. soldiers – one Hispanic, one Caucasian, and one African-American, and a flagpole flying the U.S. flag and the POW flag.

The American public’s response to the memorial design was mixed. Some denounced the memorial as the “black gash of shame,” a permanent reminder of America’s disastrous defeat, despite the memorial committee’s staunch efforts to keep the memory of the veterans and the war separate. Others criticized the V-shaped design of the wall as a negative reference to a peace sign or to the communist Vietcong and its black color as a symbol of mourning rather than heroism (Hass 16). However, though these particular reviews were negative, they reveal the abstract quality of the memorial and its ability to be open to multiple interpretations. To some in the American public, the very admission of defeat was reason for approval. Columnist James Kilpatrick noted that the memorial enables each visitor to “remember what he wishes to remember—the cause, the heroism, the blunders, or the waste” (qtd. in Hass 18). In the scholarly realm, academia takes an even more analytical and formalized view of the memorial. For instance, Marita Sturken focuses on viewing the wall of the memorial as a screen, a simple

screen whose black walls both project the “United States’ participation in the Vietnam War and [...] the experience of the Vietnam veterans since the war” and screen out the “narrative of defeat” (118). Drawing from Sturken’s views, I argue that the highly reflective quality of the wall is not only a reflection of the past and of the sacrifice that these veterans made for freedom, but furthermore a quality that draws viewers into the memorial itself, allowing them to imagine themselves amongst the heroes and experience the sacrifice they made. The reflective and magnetic nature of the wall serves as a chance to heal the grievances of the past and look toward the future. By reflecting those who view it today, the wall serves as a reminder of the importance of the sacrifices that Vietnam veterans made and a way to properly honor them in the future.

Despite the memorial’s noble intention to commemorate and honor only the veterans without any reference to the war itself, an examination of the memorial’s inclusions and, more importantly, exclusions reveals some controversial undertones in its overall message of healing for the future. The flagpole and the statue of the three servicemen, for instance, are indicative of the divide surrounding the conflict in Vietnam. This divide is seen in the fact that the sculpture does not include a statue of a South Vietnamese soldier, and the flagpole does not include the South Vietnamese flag. Perhaps this exclusion was purposed to sever all ties between the Veterans Memorial and the war itself, and to center the memorial on only the sacrifice of the American soldiers. As Asian American Studies professor Nguyen-Vo claims, most people in mainstream America merely associate the Vietnamese-American community with “anti-communism, the trailing echoes of a won Cold War, or a resentful atavism to a lost hot war,” (158). However, it also can be interpreted as the American public’s failure to recognize the South Vietnamese soldiers whom they fought alongside. Nguyen-Vo also contends that the act of remembering is very much a political and ethical choice. Her views represent a relatively

negative perspective on the American government's "forgetting," as she calls it, of the Vietnamese American community and their strong connection to the Vietnam War and the South Vietnamese lives that were lost because of it. Thus this exclusion can be interpreted negatively as a reflection of Americans' ignorance of the South Vietnamese sacrifice and struggle, something that could very much be a hindrance to the process of healing from the past and progressing toward the future.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial committee's ultimate goal was to move the American public to recognize Vietnam veterans by commemorating only the veterans of the war, not the controversial war itself, thus constituting a *veterans* memorial. However, by way of their aim to cut all ties between the Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam War, they also cut out any possibility for recognition of South Vietnamese veterans and refugees. In order to address this exclusion, the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster, California was decisively designed to commemorate both fronts and all aspects of the conflict in Vietnam, constituting a *war* memorial. In contrast to the exclusivity conveyed by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the architectural elements of the Vietnam War Memorial acknowledge the American and South Vietnamese soldier, as well as the war itself, providing a more accepting and united front that is reflective of the Vietnamese American community's struggle to insert themselves into the national memory of the war.

Initiated by Westminster councilman Frank Fry in 1997, over twenty years after the end of the Vietnam War, the project to build the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster was created after the Vietnamese community in Southern California, also known as Little Saigon², expressed their desire to erect a war memorial honoring Vietnam veterans, both American and South Vietnamese. The memorial would be especially significant for several reasons, most notably

²Little Saigon is officially comprised of the cities of Westminster, Garden Grove, and Santa Ana. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, at the time of the founding of the Vietnam War Memorial, Vietnamese made up 31% of Westminster's population and 21% of Garden Grove's population (Vo).

because it was founded in Little Saigon, the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam itself, and also because it would be the first memorial in the nation to honor South Vietnamese veterans, and the only memorial in the world to honor both American and South Vietnamese veterans. With the support of private, mostly Vietnamese, donors, the project was able to garner the minimum of \$500,000 needed to build the memorial. Once the project was underway, the memorial committee, comprised of both Americans and Vietnamese Americans, selected Mission Viejo sculptor Tuan Nguyen³ to design and sculpt a 12-foot statue of two soldiers, one American and one South Vietnamese, standing side by side, emphasizing the friendship between the two. After six years of political conflicts and suspicious funding issues⁴, the complete memorial was officially dedicated on April 27, 2003. Other prominent features of the memorial include three flags – the American flag, the South Vietnamese flag, and the POW flag – as well as a memorial urn lighted with a fire that blazes twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

There is not much scholarly discussion that ventures to take a strictly analytical view of the Vietnam War Memorial – that is, an analysis of what the architecture of the memorial might imply. However, there is a decent amount of scholarly and social commentary on the overall importance of constructing such a memorial that on the surrounding community, commentary that can allow us to make arguments about what sort of message the memorial conveys. A prominent message that the memorial seems to convey and that many acknowledge is one of unity: that the American and South Vietnamese soldiers fought side by side. This message reinforces the united front that the memorial conveys. At the Vietnam War Memorial dedication ceremony, every single speaker, ranging from war veteran to court justice, South Vietnamese to

³ Tuan Nguyen was born in Saigon, South Vietnam in 1963. He eventually came to the United States and earned his fine arts degree from the Art Institute of South California in Laguna Beach, CA (Willis).

⁴ “Tensions later grew as community groups competed to claim credit for raising the money and City Council members angered the Vietnamese community after deciding to relocate the project away from City Hall” (Tran).

American, mentioned and emphasized how the American and South Vietnamese soldiers fought “side by side.” Prior to the formal dedication of the memorial, the Vietnamese Broadcasting Company held a viewing event for Westminster residents and visitors to see the wax sculpture of the two soldiers before it was bronzed and moved to the memorial site. The video *Soldiers in Our Eyes* shows recordings of these visitors, which included South Vietnamese and Caucasian American people who were somehow affected by the Vietnam War, communicating their reactions to seeing the statue in person for the first time. One Vietnamese veteran commented that seeing the sculpture reminded him of the friendship he had with the American soldiers who he fought side by side with. These visitors all share the same sense of gratitude towards the soldiers and appreciation about the fact that all the heroes of the war, South Vietnamese and American, are finally being recognized. This holistic and inclusive memory of the war bridges the gap between the formerly estranged South Vietnamese and American veterans and, as a result, creates a stronger path toward healing, a path founded on acceptance and closure and relatively free of tension.

These messages of acceptance and unity that the surrounding community drew from the memorial are reflected in the elements of the memorial itself. The statue of the two soldiers and their respective countries’ flags standing side by side provides a sense of camaraderie and unity between the American and the South Vietnamese, who fought on the same side during the war. Though including the South Vietnamese soldier in the sculpture does, in a way, revive controversial sentiments and remind its viewers of the war itself, bringing this controversy to the forefront and acknowledging it allows for more closure and a better prospect of healing, as opposed to a misguided illusion of closure. In the same way, the very title of the memorial, the Vietnam War Memorial, also brings negative memories of the war to mind, but this also has a

unifying effect because it acknowledges the war, and thus the South Vietnamese who fought in it, as opposed to just the American veterans. The memorial's themes of unity and of acknowledging the South Vietnamese sacrifice in the war address the exclusion of the South Vietnamese in the Vietnam memorial in D.C. and is supported by scholars such as Nguyen-Vo, who reflects on the war memorial and its role serving as a way to honor the *Vietnamese* who have been "forgotten" by American government (159). At the memorial's dedication ceremony, councilman Frank Fry declared that the memorial was Westminster's "answer to 'the Wall' on the East Coast" (qtd. in Letran). Though he admits that the memorial has been "a long time coming," Fry emphasized the fact that the memorial is "symbolic on many levels, but mainly [as a way] to unite the Vietnamese and American communities" (qtd. in Letran). By making a point to include the South Vietnamese soldier and flag and, thus, the South Vietnamese sacrifice they represent, the Westminster memorial is, in effect, a response to the exclusivity brought about in the Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C. Nguyen-Vo and Fry share the perspective that the Vietnam War Memorial carries out the Vietnamese American community's desire to integrate and unite their personal, Vietnamese memory of the war with mainstream America's memory of the war.

The elements of each Vietnam memorial, especially what they include and exclude, reveal much about the respective societies they were built in, including their memory of the Vietnam War, how they *want* to remember the war, and how they want the war to be remembered in the future. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam War Memorial were each built in completely different time periods, locations, and associated social eras, all of which shaped the distinct message that each memorial conveyed. Influenced by the American public's distaste towards the war, the memorial in D.C. aimed to garner recognition for the sacrifice of American veterans. The memorial in Westminster, built many years later, expressed the South Vietnamese

community's desire for recognition, one that the memorial D.C. did not grant and purposely excluded. These memorials may be distinct in their purpose, but they correlate in their respectful commemoration of the conflict in Vietnam, its heroes, and a common message of the prospect of future honoring and healing. However, what these memorials offer is still very much a mere prospect of healing. The road to healing is an ongoing one, a road that must be continually travelled by the generations to come. Jan Scruggs encapsulates this prospect, asserting that the Veterans Memorial merely "begin[s] a healing process, a reconciliation of the grievous divisions wrought by the war" (Scruggs qtd. in Hass 14). Of his statue, Tuan Nguyen communicates that he wanted "to show that for the American, the war is ending and he's ready to go, but for the South Vietnamese the war is still going on. We lost our country" (qtd. in Reyes). Each year, the memorials attract thousands, even millions of visitors, and commemoration ceremonies are held at the memorials annually. These numbers and the words of both of each founding figure emphasize the idea that the existence of these memorials alone will not heal the wounds caused by the war. Rather, it is the continual revisiting of the memory of the war, the constant search for closure, and the ongoing desire to honor the past that will keep the path to healing in the future alive.

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