

# The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past<sup>1</sup>

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The problem of commemoration is an important aspect of the sociology of culture because it bears on the way society conceives its past. Current approaches to this problem draw on Émile Durkheim and emphasize the way commemorative objects celebrate society's former glories. This article on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial deals with the way society assimilates past events that are less than glorious and whose memory induces controversy instead of consensus. The Vietnam War differed from other wars because it was politically controversial and morally questionable and resulted in defeat; it resembled other wars because it called out in participants the traditional virtues of courage, self-sacrifice, and honor. The task of representing these contrasting aspects of the war in a single monument was framed by the tension between contrasting memorial genres. Focusing on the discursive field out of which the Vietnam Veterans Memorial emerged, this analysis shows how opposing social constituencies articulated the ambivalence attending memories of the Vietnam War. Ambivalence was expressed not only in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's design but also in the design of Vietnam War monuments later erected throughout the United States. These efforts to memorialize a divisive war, along with attempts in other nations to come to terms with the difficulties of their past, call into question Durkheim's belief that moral unity is the ultimate object of commemoration. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and devices like it come into view not as symbols of solidarity but as structures that render more explicit, and more comprehensible, a nation's conflicting conceptions of itself and its past.

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## Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,  
What's need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?  
[JOHN MILTON, "On Shakespeare" (1630)]

In this article, we address two problems, one general and one particular, and claim that they are best approached by referring each to the other. The first, general, problem is that of discovering the processes by which culture and cultural meaning are produced. Collective memory, moral and political entrepreneurship, dominant ideologies, and representational genres are all refracted through these processes and must all be sociologically identified and gauged. The second, particular, problem is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. This unusual monument grew out of a delayed realization that some public symbol was needed to recognize the men and women who died in the Vietnam War. But its makers faced a task for which American history furnished no precedent—the task of commemorating a divisive defeat.

By dealing with the problem of commemoration in this case study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, we can address general concerns in the sociology of culture. Our concentration on the details of a particular case follows Clifford Geertz's maxim that "the essential task of theory building . . . is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them" (1973, p. 26). However, we are also concerned to locate commemorative formulas as they are repeated across cases. Thus we will be moving from the case of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to monuments that have similarly vexed commemorative missions, seeking to bring together the resemblances and differences under a single analytic framework.

We take up our subject by tracing the social, political, and cultural trajectories of the negotiation process that resulted in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. That process confronted several distinct, but related,

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problems: (1) the social problems of fixing painful parts of the past (a military defeat, a generation of unredeemed veterans) in the public consciousness, (2) the political problem of commemorating an event for which there is no national consensus, and (3) the cultural problem of working through and against traditional expectations about the war memorial genre.

#### DEDICATION

On November 11, 1982, seven years after the last American died in Vietnam, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated. Immediately before the dedication ceremony, 150,000 spectators watched and applauded as 15,000 veterans passed before them. Elaborate floats and flyovers by fighter planes and helicopters embellished the three-hour parade. The more solemn aspects of this colorful Veterans Day had been established by the reading out of the names of all 57,939 Americans killed in Vietnam in an earlier 56-hour candlelight vigil at the National Cathedral. The president of the United States participated in the observance, lighting a candle for the dead and listening to part of the long roster of names.

From the very beginning of these commemorative rites, the themes of recovery and solidarity were repeated. The motto of the Veterans Day parade, "Marching along Together," reflected these themes and prefaced the dedication day invocation: "Let the Memorial begin the healing process and forever stand as a symbol of our national unity." The rhetoric, however, expressed an ideal, not a reality. If official spokesmen defined the Memorial as a way "to unite our beloved America with her bravest and best," the bravest and best were inclined to ask what took so long. As one veteran put it: "They should have had this when we first came back in 1971." Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger conceded the delay, but added, "We have finally come to appreciate your sacrifice." Likewise, President Reagan announced that everyone is now "beginning to appreciate that they were fighting for a just cause," as he contemplated the list of those who died for it (*Washington Post*, November 14, 1982, Sec. A, pp. 1, 18, 20; *New York Times*, November 11, 1982, Sec. A, p. 1).

Many people disagreed with the president's assessment. The dedication ceremony itself began with words of contrition rather than unequivocal appreciation: "We ask for grace to face our past." And at the solemn wreath-laying ceremony—the emotional highpoint of the dedication—a bitter voice arose from the crowd: "What were we fighting for?" (*U.S. News and World Report*, November 22, 1982, p. 66). No one can claim that Americans have reached a unified answer to that question.

## DILEMMAS OF COMMEMORATION

The memory of the Vietnam War and its epoch takes place within a culture of commemoration. Current analytic approaches to culture define commemorative objects, and cultural objects in general, as “shared significance embodied in form” (Griswold 1987*a*, p. 13). However, our concern is in formulating an approach to those kinds of commemoration for which significance is not shared.

One of the most influential perspectives on the social functions of commemoration is Émile Durkheim’s. Commemorative rites and symbols, Durkheim tells us (1965, p. 420), preserve and celebrate traditional beliefs; they “serve to sustain the vitality of these beliefs, to keep them from being effaced from memory and, in sum, to revivify the most essential elements of the collective consciousness. Through [commemoration] the group periodically renews the sentiment which it has of itself and of its unity.” Associated with Durkheim’s conception is a rich research tradition that includes works by Maurice Halbwachs (1941, 1950), Robert Hertz (1965), Lloyd Warner (1959), Bernard Barber (1972), Edward Shils (1981), and David Lowenthal (1985), among others. These works, like Durkheim’s, emphasize the way commemorative monuments integrate the glory of society’s past into its present concerns and aspirations. They assume that the events or individuals selected for commemoration are necessarily heroic or, at the very least, untainted. In this view, commemoration is governed by a kind of pleasure principle that produces a unified, positive image of the past. But suppose a society is divided over the very event it selects for commemoration. Suppose that event constitutes a painful moment for society, such as a military defeat or an era of domestic oppression.<sup>2</sup> What kinds of “traditional beliefs” and “essential elements,” and what kind of monuments, if any, can crystallize these moments and unify the society around them? How is commemoration without consensus, or without pride, possible?

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial provides a good case to use in thinking about these issues. The succession of events that led to the Memorial’s creation and public reception was a culture-producing process. In that process, contrasting moral evaluations of the Vietnam War and its participants were affirmed. The process itself consisted of seven stages, each defined by the activity of different individuals and different institutions: (1) the Pentagon’s decision to mark the war by an inconspicuous plaque in Arlington Cemetery; (2) congressional activity culminating in a Vietnam Veterans Week and a series of veterans’ support programs; (3) a former Vietnam soldier’s conception and promotion of a tangible monu-

<sup>2</sup> Current efforts in the Soviet Union to memorialize Joseph Stalin’s victims provide a recent example of efforts to commemorate the oppression of civilian populations.

ment; (4) intense controversy over the nontraditional monument design selected by the United States Commission of Fine Arts; (5) modification of this original design by the incorporation of traditional symbols; (6) the public's extraordinary and unexpected reaction to the Memorial; and (7) the ongoing controversy over its further modification. Our analysis will pass through these stages as we chart the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's development.

From a comparative perspective, the moral evaluations reflected in the Vietnam Memorial derive from a formula common to all societies that seek to commemorate controversial military ventures. When the cause of a lost war is widely held to be immoral or at best needless, then, in James Mayo's (1988, p. 170) words, "defeat . . . cannot be forgotten and a nation's people must find ways to redeem those who died for their country to make defeat honorable. This can be done by honoring the individuals who fought rather than the country's lost cause." This commemorative formula, as will be shown, has been expressly invoked to justify the marking of the Vietnam War. However, it also justifies the marking of wars that resemble the one fought in Vietnam. When Israeli officials speak in ceremonies occasioned by the Lebanon War, they extol its soldiers in words that are vivid and inspiring. Their remarks on the war itself are vague and pointless. They affirm the war as a historical entity but deny it an elevated place in the national experience. The event is swallowed, as it were, but never assimilated. Such is the memory of "Israel's Vietnam": a misbegotten cause nobly pursued.<sup>3</sup> The dualism of cause and participant is similarly dramatized in the American South. Confederate Memorial Day ceremonies throughout the South vary from one place to the next, but one thread unites them all, and that is the determination to honor the gallantry of the Confederate soldier, without mention of secession and slavery. It was this same principle—the separation of the men from their cause—that President Ronald Reagan's supporters invoked to justify his visit to Bitburg to honor Nazi Germany's war dead.<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union, after its evacuation of Afghanistan, also faces questions on how to recognize men who fought and lost a war. In an unprecedented gesture of kindness toward its own prisoners of war, the Soviet government not only accorded the benefit of doubt to those whose conduct during imprisonment was uncertain, but also declared that "forgiveness toward POWs who succumbed to enemy pressure [is] a necessary part of the national healing process" (*New York Times*, June

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from Gideon Aran, Department of Sociology, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel.

<sup>4</sup> A detailed analysis of the Bitburg controversy is contained in Schmitt (1989).

14, 1988).<sup>5</sup> “National healing”—precisely the need invoked in America to justify the honoring of the Vietnam soldiers. And if the Soviet Union’s willingness to forgive those who abandoned its cause betrays a general doubt about the merit of the cause itself, it is the same kind of doubt that once plagued America.

### Commemoration as a Genre Problem

Controversies over the merits of a war are expressed at some point in debates over measures taken to commemorate it. The stages in the Vietnam Memorial’s construction reveal, on the one hand, the desire for a design that reflects the uniqueness of the Vietnam War and, on the other, the desire for a design that recognizes the sense in which the Vietnam War was similar to previous wars. The Vietnam War differed from other wars because it was controversial, morally questionable, and unsuccessful. It resembled other wars because it called forth in its participants the traditional virtues of self-sacrifice, courage, loyalty, and honor. Tension between alternative commemorative designs centers on the problem of incorporating these contrasting features into a single monument.

Distinctions among war monuments are, like all generic distinctions, produced by “sorting, seeing the similarities in different . . . objects, abstracting the common elements from a welter of particular variations” (Griswold 1987a, p. 17). Genre, in Wendy Griswold’s view, is a kind of schema that organizes perception. Griswold asserts, however, that literary and artistic genres are impermanent and express the changing character of their creators, audiences, and contexts. This conception of genre is relevant to our present problem: What kind of monument can be built in the context of changes in traditional beliefs about what war monuments should look like and represent? Since no slate of tradition can be wiped totally clean, however, definite limits to the negotiability of commemorative genres must be assumed. To generalize this assumption, any analysis of a cultural object must chart and interpret its generic limitations. When, for example, is a tragedy no longer a tragedy? When is a war memorial no longer a war memorial? This matter, the negotiability of genre, is germane to our study. Is there some essence of “war memorialness” and can people identify it? Most important, how does this generic essence translate conflicting ideas about the Vietnam War into the monument-making process? How does it contribute to the task of incorporating painful events into the collective memory?

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the common postwar adjustment problems of Vietnam and Afghanistan veterans, see *Atlanta Journal* (October 19, 1988), p. 2A; *New York Times Magazine* (June 11, 1989), p. 60 ff.

We believe a clue to this question lies in the disrupted expectations associated with the design of commemorative monuments. In the case of war memorials, traditional expectations are satisfied by a variety of forms, including memorial buildings, realistic statues of fighting men, obelisks, arches, granite monoliths, and other structures that prominently name the war being commemorated and combine particular physical elements, including vertical preeminence, grandness of size and lightness of color, with national symbolism. If all these traditional memorial forms are rejected in favor of a new one, as was the case in the original design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, then questions must be raised about what the new form seeks to represent. The topics of such questions include: (1) the nature of the war (declared vs. undeclared; just vs. unjust; victory vs. defeat); (2) the nature of the nation's response to the war (consensus vs. dissensus); (3) the nature of the public's reading of the returned veterans' social status (heroes vs. deviants); (4) the political climate of the times (conservative vs. liberal); and (5) the nature of political action (majoritarian vs. constituency-based interest groups).

#### METHOD

Attitudes and interests are translated into commemorative forms through enterprise. Before any event can be regarded as worth remembering, and before any class of people can be recognized for having participated in that event, some individual, and eventually some group, must deem both event and participants commemorable and must have the influence to get others to agree. Memorial devices are not self-created; they are conceived and built by those who wish to bring to consciousness the events and people that others are more inclined to forget. To understand memorial making in this way is to understand it as a construction process wherein competing "moral entrepreneurs" seek public arenas and support for their interpretations of the past. These interpretations are embodied in the memorial's symbolic structure.

Efforts to connect cultural objects to a people's social experience rarely attend to this kind of process. Edward Shils and Michael Young's (1953) account of the Coronation, Clifford Geertz's (1973) work on the Balinese cockfight, Lucien Goldmann's (1964) analysis of Racine's plays—these exemplary works, among others, seek to align synchronically the symbolic structure of cultural objects with the mental structures of the society. Without denying the plausibility of these particular investigations, we can recognize two shortcomings in their method. First, the method admits of contestable conclusions because an astute observer can always find something in the society for a given cultural object to reflect. Second,

the method draws attention to what the cultural object is and what it represents but not to how the object came to be what it is and how it came to represent what it does. Analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial made these shortcomings apparent to us. Looking at this Memorial at a given point in time, we could find no way to “decode” it, no way to articulate its relation to society. Only by accounting for its inception and development over time did we come to know how the Memorial’s symbolic structure expresses or emerges from the society’s values and remembrance of the war.

We have therefore designed a study that draws on three distinct, yet compatible, methodological approaches. Together, they will allow us to reproduce and interpret the context in which the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is set. We will develop (1) a “thick description” of a specific case—an ethnography that aims at uncovering the “conceptual structures that inform our subjects’ acts” (Geertz 1973, p. 27), (2) a discourse analysis that is sensitive to the inscriptions of meaning (both verbal and visual) in social contexts, and (3) a comparative methodology that leads to general conclusions.

Our use of the methodology of discourse analysis requires some elaboration. Drawing our analysis through the “discursive surround” of a cultural object, we are systematically attending to the social talk and social gestures that constitute and interpret the object in time and space. Our assumption is that specific worldviews inhere in the specialized discourses of social organizations, which include political, mass media, and military organizations. These worldviews involve ideas of what it is to be a human being in society and how human beings ought to be represented. Discourse analysis moves back and forth between organizations and the contours of their worldviews by attending to the specific words and acts of organizational members. From the most micro-level lexical features (the use of abstract vs. concrete words, for example) to syntactical features (use of active or passive voice) to overarching allegorical figures, a given discourse can be interrogated and its worldview delineated.

This type of analysis works with presumptions of genre consistencies and is thus interested to discover, in the context of a broader project of relating discourse to social setting, genre inconsistencies. In terms of verbal discourse about war memorials, this analysis includes the noting of unexpected combinations (heroism and defeat), repetitions, excess, and absence (words and concepts either appearing overabundantly or not at all). In terms of visual discourse about war memorials, it involves a semiotic process of recognizing the positioning and normative evaluation of dyadic oppositions to which the given culture specifically attends (e.g., high-low, black-white, concrete-abstract).

This methodology involves examination of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as it evolves over time. We perform thick descriptions of the Memorial's interaction with its context and show how this interaction crystallizes the way the Memorial is received and responded to. The addition of a comparative analysis of other difficult commemorative projects allows us to draw thick description into the more general project of formulating the relation between commemoration and its genres.

Theoretical and methodological issues thus feed on one another. Durkheim and his followers formulated notions of commemoration that were applicable to positive events on whose significance all could agree. In contrast, we seek to understand the commemoration of negative events. Negative events, as we define them, do not include injuries and other harm unjustly inflicted by an enemy—as occur in lost causes honorably pursued or cruelty and suffering bravely endured. Negative events are moral traumas: they not only result in loss or failure but also evoke disagreement and inspire censure. But these traumas cannot always be ignored without denying their noble side, without forgetting commitments and sacrifices that would be considered heroic in the service of other ends. It is precisely this tension that our methodology is designed to reveal and that our theory is designed to articulate.

*Data collection.*—When the realities of a particular social experience, such as the Vietnam War, thrust themselves against previously formed assumptions, individual and institutional discourses must realign their terms or remain incapable of making that war understandable. This adaptation is expressed in every aspect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's development. Our focus on this development prompted us to examine the discourses of such relevant institutions and individuals as Congress, the Commission of Fine Arts, the mass media, the Memorial's designers and visitors, among others. We found much of this discourse in the *Congressional Record*, dedication speeches, Veterans Day oratory, and commentaries appearing in newspapers and magazines. In addition, many written messages addressed to the dead soldiers are being left at the Memorial by friends and relatives. A sample of 250 of these documents includes statements about the significance of the Memorial itself. A different layer of the Memorial's meaning was the object of observations we made at the site and of similar observations reported by informants. Also, we obtained from the Department of the Interior a partial inventory of objects left at the Memorial since its completion. Typically presented in memory of the dead by family and friends, these objects range from national symbols, like flags, to private possessions, like toys or articles of clothing that once belonged to the deceased. All such tokens are gathered up from the Memorial site by the National Park Service at the end of each day and, along with the written correspondence, are

cataloged and stored at the Museum and Archaeological Regional Storage Facility in Lanham, Maryland, where we inspected them.<sup>6</sup>

No one segment of this material provides much useful information. It takes the total body of material, duly combined and arrayed in proper sequence, to reveal the unfolding of commemorative meaning.

#### A NATION'S GRATITUDE: SEARCH FOR A GENRE

The first official recognition of the Vietnam veteran was not bestowed until 1978, three years after the last American was flown out of Saigon. The recognition itself was hesitant and uncertain. A Vietnam War crypt had already been prepared in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, but the Army determined that neither of its two unidentified bodies (only 30% of the remains in either case) made for a decent corpse. Instead of honoring its Vietnam battle dead by symbolically joining them, through entombment of unknown soldiers' remains, with men fallen in earlier wars, the army recommended that a plaque and display of medals be set apart behind the tomb, along with the following inscription: "Let all know that the United States of America pays tribute to the members of the Armed Forces who answered their country's call." This strange declaration bears no reference at all to the Vietnam War, and it required an act of the Veterans Affairs subcommittee to make it more specific: "Let all people know that the United States pays tribute to those members of the Armed Forces who served honorably in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam era" (*The Nation*, April 8, 1978, p. 389). In even this second, stronger statement, three things are noteworthy: (1) although revised in Congress, the statement was initiated by the military; (2) it received little publicity; and (3) it designated the conflict in Vietnam by the word "era"

<sup>6</sup> In November 1986, a staff member of the Museum and Archaeological Regional Storage (MARS) Facility turned over to us, for inspection at the site, photocopies of all written correspondence left at the Memorial wall and collected up to that point. In sampling both genres (letters, poems, memos, greeting cards, business cards, flyers, etc.) and themes (comments on the war, comments on the Memorial, comments on individual soldiers, government officials, family members, etc.), we wanted to avoid redundancy and to collect a representative assortment and number. Of the approximately 350 written items examined, 250 were copied and later analyzed. The National Park Service's publicly circulated inventory of material objects, on the other hand, is complete but limited as to period of coverage. The inventory began in November 1984 (when the Memorial's statue was unveiled) and was sharply cut back in September 1985 for budgetary reasons. The collection and storage of objects, however, continued after September 1985, and these objects are available for inspection at the MARS facility. Finally, our on-site observations consisted of four separate visits to the Veterans Memorial and one visit to the Moving Wall between 1986 and 1989. These contacts, which total about 10 hours, do not include visits to local Vietnam War monuments. During each visit our observations were entirely unstructured.

rather than “war.” Thus the recognition came from only a small part of the society for whose interests and values the war was fought; it was communicated to that society without conspicuous ceremony; and it betrayed confusion about the meaning of the war by its failure to find a word to describe it. This last point is the most noteworthy of all. Although a war had not been officially declared, many congressional resolutions during the 1980s referred to the hostilities in Vietnam as “the Vietnam war.” Touchiness during the late 1970s about what to call the conflict stemmed from social, not legal, concerns. To name an event is to categorize it morally and to provide an identity for its participants. Anomalous names betray ambiguity about an event’s nature and uncertainty about how to react to the men who take part in it.

The first solution to the war’s commemorative genre problem was thus halting and uncertain. The fighters were honored but not by an imposing monument. They were honored by a plaque, inconspicuously placed, whose inscription was, itself, indirect and muted. Undeclared wars are usually fought with restraint, however violent they might be. The Vietnam War’s first official commemoration mirrored this restraint, marking the cause without really drawing attention to it.

Official ambivalence toward the Vietnam War showed up next in the activities of Congress. It was in Congress, in fall 1978, that the work culminating in the Veterans Memorial began. The plan then discussed, however, was not to commemorate those who had died in the war, but to set aside a special “Vietnam Veterans Week” for its survivors. Thus evolved a second solution to the problem of finding a genre to commemorate the Vietnam War. Time, rather than granite, the dedication of a week rather than the dedication of a tangible monument, sufficed to honor the Vietnam fighting man. This plan’s principal entrepreneurs were the members of the Vietnam-Era Caucus, 19 U.S. representatives and senators who had served in the military during the Vietnam War years. They meant to achieve two goals: to unify a nation divided by war and to induce Congress to recognize that many war veterans were suffering from unmet needs. Before anything could actually be accomplished, however, certain obstacles had to be overcome, obstacles inherent in the object of commemoration itself.

To promote unity by separating the event from its men was Congress’s first concern. In Congressman Grisham’s words, “We may still have differing opinions about our involvement in the Vietnam War, but we are no longer divided in our attitudes toward those who served in Vietnam” (U.S. House of Representatives 1979, p. 12588). At one time, however, the division was deep. Grisham himself acknowledged that the veterans were stigmatized or, at best, ignored on their return from the

battlefront. No ceremony dramatized and ennobled their sacrifices. Most of the other congressmen knew this, and they wanted to upgrade the veterans' status. Transforming the Vietnam soldier from an Ugly American into a patriot who innocently carried out the policy of elected leaders, Congress tried to create a positive image that all Americans could accept.

However, the very attempt to improve the veterans' status raised unsettling questions. Congressmen openly recognized that America's lower-income minorities were disproportionately represented in the armed forces and that the trauma of war bore more heavily on them, economically and psychologically, than it would have on a middle-class army. An uncomplimentary view of the returning soldier accompanied this recognition. The congressmen made no mention of the crimes allegedly committed by American soldiers in Vietnam; however, they did recognize publicly "statistics such as the fact that 25 percent of the persons incarcerated in correctional institutions in America are veterans of the Vietnam War," along with the veterans' need for "an expanded drug and alcohol abuse treatment and rehabilitation program." Family counseling needs were also described: "Of those veterans married before going to Vietnam almost 40 percent were divorced within six months of their return" (U.S. House of Representatives 1979, pp. 12589, 12593, 12584; for details, see Johnson [1976, 1980]; U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs 1981). Congresswoman Mikulski recognized the veterans' social marginality by pleading for the government to "be responsive to the unique problems which they face . . . so that they will be better able to fill their roles in society." Congressman Mikva spoke to the same point. Existing veterans' programs, he explained, are not enough for this group. "We must back up this symbolic recognition of their efforts for our country with . . . educational and rehabilitative programs geared to their special needs" (U.S. House of Representatives 1979, pp. 12583, 12588). Here, as elsewhere, the emphasis is on the veterans' shortcomings, and this emphasis reflects society's desire to reconstitute them morally.

It is in this last aspect of congressional discussion that we gain access to the deeper layers of the text being written about the veterans. This text, as presented in the *Congressional Record*, both reveals and participates in a moment of transition in the official assessment of the Vietnam veteran. Our reading of the text locates a residual suspicion about the veterans' psychological and moral status. When one notes all the negative references to the veterans—their employment problems, their physical problems, their psychological problems, their sense of alienation, their inclination toward drugs and crime—it becomes evident that an idiom more relevant to social deviants than to returning soldiers dominated

congressional discourse. And this discourse cuts deeper and seemingly truer insofar as its topic included men who had been the agents, if not the architects, of America's first military defeat.

Never during the progress of this discussion did its participants express the desire to memorialize the heroic side of the Vietnam War. They felt that war memories could be expressed suitably in a Vietnam Veterans Week and in a series of veteran rehabilitation programs. A marked utilitarianism became a key part of this commemorative project.

#### ENTREPRENEURS AND SPONSORS

Negative characterizations of the Vietnam veteran might have eventually undermined his positive recognition were it not for a new development, one that was oriented less to the living than to the dead. During the time that the Vietnam-Era Caucus worked on its legislation, a former army corporal from a working-class family, Jan Scruggs, had independently decided on a plan of his own. As noted above, one of the premises of Vietnam Veterans Week was that the soldier must be separated from the cause. This separation is precisely what Scruggs aimed to celebrate publicly. At first, his idea attracted little notice, but it eventually overshadowed Vietnam Veterans Week in commemorative significance. He would build a memorial to the men who served in Vietnam and would inscribe on it the names of all the war dead. The plan represented a different solution to the commemorative genre problem than those previously proposed. It was different in that it combined the traditional idea of a stone monument to the war dead with the radical idea of excluding from it any prominent symbol of national honor and glory. In place of such a symbol would appear a list of the dead soldiers' names—58,000 of them. On May 28, 1979, Scruggs announced the formation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to raise money to build the monument.

The accumulation of money to build the Veterans Memorial did not automatically follow from the desire to build it. What needed to be overcome was not only opposition from the still vocal critics of the war,<sup>7</sup> but

<sup>7</sup> "Let's not perpetuate the memory of such dishonorable events [the Vietnam War] by erecting monuments to them," wrote a former antiwar advocate in a letter to Jan Scruggs. It was a typical letter in that the "chief source of potential opposition" to any veterans memorial was, in Scruggs's view, "the antiwar movement" (*National Geographic* [May 1985], p. 558). To commemorate the soldier was, from this viewpoint, to insult the true heroes. In the words of another war opponent: "Buttering up Vietnam veterans as 'forgotten heroes' is a slap in the face directed at millions in this country who resisted the war" (Hess 1983, p. 126). These sentiments were expressed throughout the Memorial's development. Thus, when the Commission of Fine Arts conducted hearings on the addition of a statue to the Memorial site, the antiwar voices were heard again. Why would anyone want a "literal representation" of the American

more important, a sense of uncertainty in the public at large as to what the monument would look like and what it would represent. These suspicions and uncertainties were relieved when the Memorial's original framing rule—"Honor the soldier, not the cause"—was reiterated in the very selection of its sponsors. Chosen were men and women who differed visibly and widely on many political questions but shared the desire to honor the Vietnam veterans. The sponsoring leaders and celebrities included Vernon Jordan, president of the National Urban League; Ruben Bonilla, national president of the League of United Latin American Citizens; Carol Burnett, the actress who played the mother of a soldier killed in the war in the television drama, *Friendly Fire*; First Lady Rosalynn Carter and former First Lady Betty Ford; Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame; Bob Hope; Rocky Bleir, described as a "wounded Vietnam veteran who came back to star with the Pittsburgh Steelers"; and Admiral James B. Stockdale, formerly a prisoner of war and now president of The Citadel. These individuals represented many sectors of society: blacks, Hispanics, women, religious and academic figures, entertainment and sports celebrities, and military men. With the support of this noncontroversial coalition of sponsors, funds were quickly raised to pay for design and construction costs and, by July 4, 1980, a few days after the proclamation of Vietnam Veterans' Week, President Carter signed a joint resolution that reserved a two-acre site in Constitution Gardens, between the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, for the Veterans Memorial's placement.

But if Scruggs's plans were proceeding apace, the ambiguous image of the Vietnam veteran was again evoked, this time by the mass media. Unlike in the congressional debates, however, the evocation here was oblique. One needed to read between the lines. Now Jan Scruggs himself was the object of representation. The different accounts of Scruggs's moment of "inspiration" in the spring of 1979 disclosed different visions of the Vietnam veteran. Furthermore, these accounts revealed the kind of moral entrepreneur that the sponsoring institutions were willing to support. For these institutions, the merit of the Memorial project turned on the credibility of its promoter.

### The Case of Jan Scruggs

Most accounts of Jan Scruggs's memorial-making efforts began with a phrase like: "Ten years after he was seriously wounded by an enemy

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role in Vietnam? asked one witness. The memorable images of the war, this witness went on to say, include not heroic military feats but rather a naked child running from her burning village, a South Vietnam officer shooting an unarmed guerilla through the head, and the National Guard shooting down students at Kent State.

grenade . . .” The fact that Scruggs was recognized as a wounded veteran is very important. Wounds in general play a significant role in the discourse about the Vietnam veterans and their memorial. That Scruggs’s wounds are invariably noted means that he is understood to speak authoritatively for the needs of the veterans. Wounds here are legitimating marks. The body of the veteran is, itself, the proof of intimate experience with war, of courage and manhood. Scruggs’s wounds make him a generalizable veteran, a collective representation in his own right. This characterization of Scruggs as, first and foremost, a wounded veteran has the effect of invoking the traditional notion of war hero. With that invocation, the traditional notion of a war memorial becomes more plausible.

Scruggs’s wounds also resonate with and help to resolve the negative image of the generic Vietnam veteran. The most redeemable veterans were those who had, quite literally, died from their wounds. It is their names alone, after all, that appear on the Memorial wall. The least likely candidates for commemoration were those who had escaped the war unscathed. However, Jan Scruggs, the veteran who carries 11 pieces of a grenade in his body, acts as a perfect mediator between the living and the dead. He is so perfect because he shares something with both. He has suffered for his participation in a bad war and has lived to redeem his fellows.

After Scruggs’s battle wounds are revealed, the story of his idea to build a memorial diverges along three different paths. Whether these three versions are all true or consistent with one another is unimportant. What is important about the stories is that they provided an image that supporters of the monument project could think with, an image they could use in their struggle against their own doubts and against the project’s opponents. The basic story is that the idea for a memorial came to Scruggs one night after he saw the film *The Deerhunter* (see, e.g., *Time*, July 14, 1980, p. 23). In this story, Scruggs is inspired by a fictional account of the war in which he had fought. Earlier films about Vietnam had depicted the war’s alienating effects; this film did the opposite: it portrayed the common man’s continued devotion to his country, despite personal tragedy, and so affirmed his right to the country’s admiration.

In the second story, Scruggs’s decision is influenced by Robert Jay Lifton’s work on “delayed stress syndrome,” which he had read before seeing *The Deerhunter* (*Esquire*, September 1985, p. 64). Here the moral entrepreneur derives his inspiration and authority not only from popular culture but also from science. This rendition seems positive, but its contents raise all the old doubts because the book that Scruggs is depicted as reading addresses the problems of readjustment experienced by so many veterans: flashbacks, unemployment, drug abuse, and violence. However, this rendition also reconstitutes the veteran, mitigating his

moral shortcomings by transforming them into medical and psychological problems.

In the final inspirational allegory, Scruggs gets his idea for a memorial while “nursing a bottle of bourbon” in contemplation of *The Deerhunter* (*U.S. News and World Report*, November 22, 1982). This scene is solitary and lonely in a way that seeing a movie or even reading a book is not. It also introduces the theme of alcohol, one of the several problems commonly believed to afflict the Vietnam veterans. The image of “nursing” a bottle might indicate despair were it not for the fact that Scruggs has been gainfully employed at the Department of Labor since his return from Vietnam. That the bottle he is nursing contains bourbon (the prosperous man’s drink) is symbolic of his personal stability. While many articles refer to him as a former “grunt” (enlisted man, as were most of the war’s social casualties), Scruggs is represented as having successfully negotiated his transition back to civilian life.

These characterizations set forth in its most coherent form an image that began to evolve the very moment Scruggs became a public figure. From the start, he was the sympathetic subject of popular media representations. For Congress he was a representative man, a living symbol of America’s hard-working, law-abiding veterans. The 1987 television movie *To Heal a Nation* (based on Scruggs’s book of the same title) shows that this perception has been as plausible in recent years as it was 10 years ago. In this movie, Scruggs and the Memorial get equal billing. Scruggs embodies the Memorial. He embodies it now, as he did then, in a multivocal way. Conceding that the Vietnam War would never be deemed justifiable, he appealed to those who opposed it. Having fought himself, and knowing how his comrades thought and felt about the war, he appealed to the veterans and their supporters. The Scruggs image was instrumental, not in preventing or ending the debate over the Veterans Memorial, but in reflecting it. In this way, Scruggs enlisted the patronage of men and women of differing and even opposing points of view. A less attractive man would have been less able to capitalize on Congress’s sense of its debt to the veterans.

It was the redemptive qualities of Scruggs’s project—precisely, its embodiment of gratitude, the only currency for paying off a moral debt—that congressional supporters emphasized. As President Carter approved Congress’s resolution, he expressed his belief that the formal honoring of the veteran would also promote the healing of a nation divided by war. To this end, the Memorial fund’s directors continued to avoid political statements in both fund-raising efforts and in contemplation of the Memorial design. The universal support of the Senate and strong support of the House were based on this same requirement: that the Memorial make no reference to the war, only to the men who fought

it. Political neutrality was the condition for the support of other sponsoring organizations, including the Reserve Officers Association, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Marine Corps League, Retired Officers Association, and American Gold Star Mothers. These organizations had been assured by Scruggs that the Memorial “will stand as a symbol of our unity as a nation and as a focal point of all Americans regardless of their views on Vietnam” (U.S. House of Representatives 1980, p. 4805). Indeed, its very name would be noncontroversial: it would be a “Veterans Memorial” rather than a “War Memorial.” The federal agencies responsible for approving the final design and placement of the Memorial, particularly the Commission of Fine Arts and the Department of Interior, were guided by this same principle.

An apolitical monument was thus supported by the apolitical makeup of its sponsoring agencies. For popular wars the makeup of such groups is less important, since consensus on the object of commemoration already exists. The range of political support for a Vietnam Memorial was stressed precisely because political consensus on the Vietnam cause was minimal. Scruggs’s solution to the genre problem was not implemented until it attracted the support of a political spectrum wide enough to make his solution credible, or so it seemed.

#### VISION AND REVISION: FROM PURE TO MIXED GENRE

Recreating the context and process out of which the Vietnam Veterans Memorial developed, we came to see it not as a monument that ignores political meanings, but as a kind of *coincidentia oppositorum*—an agency that brings these opposed meanings together without resolving them. In this regard, the first and most fundamental point to emphasize is the nation’s failure to reach an agreement on the Vietnam War’s purposes and consequences. Hence there is a “genre problem”: how to create a memorial that celebrates the virtues of the individual veteran without reference to his cause.<sup>8</sup> As this criterion was set beside the attitude of the Congress toward the Vietnam veteran, an attitude that combined anxiety about his moral shortcomings (crime, drugs, and alcohol) with gratitude for his sacrifices, there arose pressures in the government to specify the Memorial’s essential contours before it invited artists to submit their own designs. Informed by ambivalence about both the cause and its participants, these specifications pushed the Memorial in the direction of the muted and unobtrusive. Thus, in a formal letter approving the design

<sup>8</sup> See Greenblatt (1983) for a discussion of Albrecht Durer’s monumental solution to the obverse problem: how to celebrate the virtue of a cause without reference to its participants.

competition, Department of Interior official Bill Whalen explained to the chairman of the Subcommittee on Parks, Dale Bumpers: "Since the proposed memorial is of great significance, and does not memorialize a single person or event, but rather a 10-year period of our Nation's history and is envisioned as a landscaped solution emphasizing horizontal rather than vertical elements, we concur with the report which indicates that a site in Constitution Gardens is preferable" (U.S. Senate 1980, p. 9434). Whalen clearly views the memorial as significant and noteworthy, yet he understands that a problem inheres in the design of any monument to commemorate this particular "10-year period." As significant as it might be, the memorial cannot be grand, vertical, or heroic. Like any "landscaped solution," it must hug the ground. It must be modest, horizontal, and nonheroic.

The memorial chosen by the Commission of Fine Arts from the more than 1,400 designs submitted was, indeed, the simplest and least imposing: two unadorned black walls, each about 250 feet in length, composed of 70 granite panels increasing in height from several inches at the end of each wall to 10 feet where they come together at a 125 degree angle. Although this angle aligns the two walls with the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument, the walls themselves are placed below ground level, invisible from most vantage points on or near the Mall. The Vietnam War is thus defined as a national event, but in a spatial context that brackets off that event from those commemorated by neighboring monuments. The walls add to this sense of detachment by their internal format, which draws the viewer into a separate warp of time and space. As one moves from the edge of one wall to the point where it joins the other, one experiences a descending movement in space and a circular movement in time, for the 57,939 soldiers' names appear in the chronological order of the dates of their deaths, such that the war's first and last fatalities are joined at the walls' conjunction.

The commission's preference for this design was unanimous. However, for every layman who approved that choice, another seemed to be enraged by it. Those who shared the designer's goals were inclined to believe she had achieved them. Maya Ying Lin declared that her design was not meant to convey a particular political message but to evoke "feelings, thoughts, and emotions" of a variant and private nature: "What people see or don't see is their own projection."<sup>9</sup> Jan Scruggs

<sup>9</sup> Peter Ehrenhaus's interpretation follows closely Maya Lin's intention. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," he writes, "willfully relinquishes the traditional role to speak as the official voice of the community, explaining the meaning of past events, reassuring us that these deaths had meaning, celebrating the virtue of sacrifice. . . . Rather than electing 'speech' through a traditional form of symbolic expression, it opts for silence. It . . . places both the burden and the freedom upon us to discover

concurred: "The Memorial says exactly what we wanted to say about Vietnam—absolutely nothing." Indeed, on the original design the word, Vietnam, did not even appear (a statement indicating that the names on the wall belong to dead soldiers, and identifying the war in which they fought, was added later). This minimalist response to the commemorative task impressed one of the jurors as being "reverential"; another called it "a simple solution for a confused age"; a third saw "no escape from its power." Ellsworth Bunker, former ambassador to South Vietnam, found it to be "a distinguished and fitting mark of respect." Likewise, the *New York Times* applauded the design's "extreme dignity and restraint." It "seems to capture all the feelings of ambiguity and anguish that the Vietnam War evoked [and] conveys the only point about the war on which people may agree: that those who died should be remembered" (Hess 1983, p. 1235; Scruggs and Swerdlow 1985, pp. 63, 68, 69, 97; *New York Times*, May 18, 1981).

It is difficult to tell whether Maya Lin's supporters admired her design because it was an appropriately novel war memorial or because it was not a war memorial at all. The detractors, on the other hand, made frequent comparison between Lin's design and traditional war monuments, highlighting the confrontation between two commemorative styles—a heroic style traditionally associated with noble causes fought for and won, and what could be called an aheroic style, newly conceived for the tasteful recognition of those who had died for a useless and less-than-noble cause. Most veterans, however, did see something noble, if not useful, in the Vietnam War, and for them the Commission of Fine Arts had gone too far. One veteran, a member of the Memorial fund, described the design chosen by the commission as "the most insulting and demeaning memorial to our experience that was possible . . . a degrading ditch." As to its color: "Black is the universal color of shame, sorrow and degradation in all races, all societies worldwide." For another dissenting fund member, the sinking of the monument into the earth was an admission that the United States committed crimes in Vietnam. (Here are enlargements of the criminality theme that marked congressional discussions about the veterans.) The wall was also condemned as "an open urinal," "a wailing wall for anti-draft demonstrators," "a tribute to Jane Fonda," and a "perverse prank" that would baffle the general public. Another critic, who happened to be the Memorial's biggest financial backer, called the art commission's choice a "slap in the face," a "tombstone," "something for New York intellectuals," a kind

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what these past events mean, whether these deaths do have meaning, what virtue is to be found in sacrifice, and what our own relationship should be to our political institutions" (1988, p. 55).

of 21st-century art that few would appreciate. To make matters worse, the proposed order of names for the wall presents “a random scattering” that can only confound loved ones. Other critics, including the editors of *National Review*, complained about the names themselves. Since the memorial focuses on individuals, not the war, “it makes death in war a private matter rather than a sacrifice for a collective cause”<sup>10</sup> (Hess 1983, pp. 122–25; Scruggs and Swerdlow 1985, pp. 68, 71, 82–83).

Opposition to the memorial wall was expressed by attacks on details like color, shape, and location, but underlying all specific objections was a disdain for the style itself. Many believed that that style violated the limits of the war-memorial genre. Designed to be apolitical, this memorial struck critics as nonpatriotic and nonheroic. It conveyed a conception of the war and a conception of the soldier that ran counter to those of many Americans. These Americans, responded Jan Scruggs, “wanted the Memorial to make Vietnam what it had never been in reality: a good, clean, glorious war seen as necessary and supported by the united country.” One leading opponent of the design conceded that the nation had not looked back favorably on the Vietnam War; however, he believed that “history can be re-evaluated” and “a piece of art remains, as a testimony to a particular moment in history, and we are under a solemn obligation to get that moment down as correctly as possible” (quoted in Scruggs and Swerdlow 1985, p. 94).

Most critics believed that only a “real” memorial could correctly represent the Vietnam War, but since that was politically impossible, they sought an addition to the present design in order to offset the “national humiliation” it perpetuated. At length, a compromise was conceived. An American flag, and next to that, a realistic statue of three soldiers, identifiable as white, black, and Hispanic, portrayed returning from patrol and gazing toward the names on the wall, would bring the original design closer to the traditional genre—would make it look more like a real war memorial.

Although their reasons may have differed, over 90% of the Vietnam veterans and 75% of the nonveterans surveyed after attending the Memorial’s dedication ceremony<sup>11</sup> were in favor of including the flag as an

<sup>10</sup> For a sympathetic account of the Memorial as an antiwar symbol, see Foss (1986).

<sup>11</sup> This mail survey included 888 people, including 530 Vietnam veterans, 96 veterans’ family members, 89 Vietnam-era veterans, and 140 nonveterans. Although the author reports that the number of respondents is “far more than is required for statistical validity,” he is silent as to the actual number of nonrespondents. This author was motivated to conduct the survey because he believed strongly in the need to add a flag and statue to the Memorial site; however, he declares that every part of the inquiry, from question wording to analysis, was conducted properly, and with the supervision of a “prominent expert in survey research” (U.S. House of Representatives 1982, pp. E5108-9).

integral part of the Memorial site. At least 85% of every group surveyed (Vietnam veterans, Vietnam veterans' families, Vietnam-era veterans, other veterans, and nonveterans) approved of placing both a flag and statue somewhere on the Memorial grounds. And a majority in every group, ranging from 85% of the Vietnam veterans to 56% of the nonveterans, wanted the Memorial to include an inscription of the purpose for which the war was fought. It was the Vietnam veterans who felt most strongly about these changes, if strength of feeling can be gauged from reactions to the design of the wall by itself. Only a third of the veterans, compared with three-quarters of the nonveterans, reported a favorable impression of this design. The addition of the flag and the statue, the veterans claimed, would express a belief they could not find represented in the wall alone: that there is a nobility inherent in serving and dying for one's country. Combat, death, the nation—these are the concepts that many people wanted to see emphasized together (U.S. House of Representatives 1982, pp. 5107–8).

These openly nationalistic ideas met strong resistance in the Commission of Fine Arts, but Interior Secretary James Watt, moved by widespread support elsewhere, demanded their acceptance as a condition of his approving the Memorial site. And so by mid-1983, the flag was set in place. On Veterans Day 1984, two years after the Memorial's dedication, the statue was unveiled.

With this new configuration, the conservative president and his administration seemed to have warmed up to the Memorial. Echoes of the 1960s antiwar protests from the reading of the names of the war dead may have induced President Reagan to send an obscure official to represent the government at the 1982 unveiling of the Memorial wall. At the 1984 unveiling of the statue, the president himself officiated. A few days later, the Army decided that it would be proper after all to add the meager remains of an American killed in Vietnam to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The Vietnam war dead were thus sanctified and incorporated into the nation's military heritage and their cause correspondingly elevated. The unpopularity and the outcome of the Vietnam War, however, imposed a limit to how far its commemoration could evolve in this traditional direction.

#### FLAGS AND EFFIGIES IN THE MARKING OF A LOST WAR

The combination of flag, statue, and name-filled wall reflected profound disagreement as to how the Vietnam War should be remembered and conveyed this disagreement by an apparent binary opposition. The wall was believed to elevate the participant and ignore the cause; the flag and statue were believed to elevate the nation and its causes above the

participant. However, the qualities and the relationship between these two patterns of meaning turned out to be more complex than anyone anticipated.

Public discourse about the addition of the flag and statue reveal deep anxieties evoked by the Memorial's original conception. Primary among these was the anxiety about masculinity and its representation. Tradition links masculinity with heroism and strength, but this linkage is weakened by defeat in war. Such concern was rarely if ever openly discussed, but it showed up in the identities of the artists, the artists' attitudes toward the war and their respective contributions to the Memorial, and in their supporters' and critics' own understanding of the war and its soldiers.

Maya Ying Lin was a young, Yale University student when her design was chosen as the winner of the Memorial competition. Lin was an articulate spokesperson for her design and was able to reflect on the way it embodied her intentions (which necessarily coincided with those of the Commission of Fine Arts). When asked, in an interview for *Art in America*, whether she thought the Memorial had a female sensibility, she responded: "In a world of phallic memorials that rise upward it certainly does. I didn't set out to conquer the earth, or overpower it the way Western man usually does. I don't think I've made a passive piece, but neither is it a memorial to the idea of war" (Hess 1983, p. 121). Lin distinguishes her design from the "masculine" memorials by referring to its horizontal positioning and its refusal to dominate the landscape. She does not, however, associate such a design with passivity or weakness. She is articulating an alternative notion of strength. But, intentional fallacy caveats aside for the moment, is this indeed an adequate symbol for the commemoration of anything having to do with war? Is not war, after all, always and everywhere, about the kind of masculine strength associated with conquest and domination?

Referring to the sense of responsibility soldiers have for each other during war, John Wheeler, one of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial project's organizers, and a veteran himself, wrote: "I consider my commitment as a statement that there are things worth dying for. It is a masculine statement. This is why war has tended to be viewed as a masculine enterprise" (1984, p. 140). Clearly the question of masculinity and its meaning was in the air, and the peculiar nature of the Vietnam War made it all the more confusing. The very raising of this question had broad implications for the resolution of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's genre problem.

A strictly semiotic reading of the wall would highlight its "femininity." It is an opening in nature. It is womblike in its embrace of the visitor. The wall also reflects the visitor in its stone, thus eliciting a form of empathy, a trait traditionally considered more available to women than