

WAR MEMORIALS

Wars are commemorated by an immense variety of devices—obelisks, monoliths, marble temples, battlefields and battle markers, statues, cemeteries, tombs, memorial chapels and parks, plaques and walls bearing the names of the dead, place names, and “living memorials”—including hospitals, stadiums, and highways. War memorials are designed to consecrate great struggles that protect the nation’s interests and preserve its existence.

Two aspects of every war affect the way memorials represent it: (1) whether it ended in victory or defeat; and (2) whether it was believed necessary or unnecessary, morally just or wrong. To four kinds of war—victories and defeats in good causes and bad—correspond four sets of memorials. The symbolic qualities of these memorials overlap, however, because they are determined by more than the wars they represent. Memorials adapt the realities of wars to the needs and concerns of the generation that commemorates them.

The Revolutionary War, first of America’s just victories, was not widely commemorated by the generation that fought it. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many communities devised objects to mark the war, but almost all were obscure, and even the most notable—the Bunker Hill obelisk—was meagerly ornamented and conveyed no sense of the cause it symbolized. Commemorative restraint reflected a political culture that was antiauthoritarian, suspicious of standing armies, and associated military monuments with centralized state power. Most of the monuments that presently commemorate the Revolution were erected at the turn of twentieth century.

Civil War commemorations began as soon as the fighting stopped, but their scale was again limited. In the South, memories of a lost but noble cause took root, but a shattered economy and social system precluded extensive monument making. In the North, local cemeteries were embellished, bodies were exhumed to fill new military cemeteries, and many monuments appeared. However, the most familiar memorials—statues of anonymous soldiers—were erected on town squares and outside city halls during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By that time the last of the Civil War generation, along with its many resentments, was dying off and the memorials assumed new meaning. Northerners and Southerners respected each other’s conception of the war as a just cause; each side embraced the other as it erected similar monuments to itself. The North’s largest commemorative center, Gettysburg National Military Park, incorporated monuments to Southern soldiers; Southern cemeteries included honored places for Northern soldiers. The ideal of regional reconciliation was made visible and tangible in monuments to the Civil War dead.

World War I cost the United States less in life and treasure than did the Civil War, but its proclaimed achievement, saving the world for democracy was greater, and so was its monument production. Massive numbers of monuments emerged right after the armistice, ranging all the way from plaques to statues of “doughboys” (common soldiers) at city halls and town squares to massive commemorative centers. America’s fatalities—117,000—were relatively light, but its memorials were grand and somber.

Early twentieth-century monument production in America was accelerated by a City Beautiful movement that used the Industrial Revolution's wealth to clear away its debris. Of the many objects chosen to beautify the city, war memorials were best suited because they symbolized the expanding power and reach of the state and the great wave of "Americanism" that inundated the society during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Nowhere is this confluence of statism and democratization better exemplified than in Newark, New Jersey's, *Wars of America* (1926)—a massive sculpture of forty-two figures representing all wars from the Revolution to World War I. What distinguishes this monument is not its size and scope, but its depiction of young men being embraced by their mothers and fathers, wives and children, as they go off to fight. In *Wars of America*, civilians and soldiers are commemorated together. This same theme, the continuity of civil and military institutions, is manifested in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Dedicated in 1921 as a monument to World War I's common soldier, the Tomb ennobles the common people of a democratic society.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is located in Arlington, Virginia, Military Cemetery. Military cemeteries are the most moving of all memorial forms because they embody the culture of modern democracy. Before the Civil War, soldiers were buried together in unmarked graves near the field on which they fell. During the Civil War, state governments built military cemeteries to provide the dead with "decent" (individual) resting places. However, only one of these cemeteries, Gettysburg's, became a prominent memorial site during the war; most, including thirteen federal cemeteries, were established too late to accommodate the great number killed. Not until World War I did field graves become the exception rather than the rule. Seventy percent of the World War I dead were returned directly to their families for private burial; the remainder were buried in overseas cemeteries. Almost half of these—some 14,000 men—rest in the Meuse-Argonne cemetery's separately marked but identical graves, laid out without regard to rank in rectangular equality—a perfect democracy of the dead.

World War I's techniques did not all transfer to World War II; in fact, World War II was undramatically commemorated. Arlington's Iwo Jima Memorial is probably the war's best-known and most popular memorial in the United States, but it is atypical. The typical monument is utilitarian, created by attaching the adjective "memorial" to the names of auditoriums, schools, hospitals, community centers, sports arenas, highways, and other public places. The concept of the "living memorial" proved compatible with the muted idealism and restrained nationalism of the late 1940s and 1950s. Living memorials, indeed, desanctify war by melding memory of the hallowed dead with secular pursuits of everyday life.

Overseas, however, U.S. World War II commemorations outdid the traditional World War I pattern. Most of the American dead, as before, were returned to their families; but not all. More than 10,000 were interred in the Lorraine cemetery; 9,000 in the Normandy cemetery; and more than 7,000 in the Sicily-Rome cemetery. At each place marble walls were built in memory of the missing. At the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu lie the remains of 13,000 soldiers who died throughout the Pacific

theater of war. The cemetery wall's 18,000 names include both the missing and the dead. The United States maintains twenty-four cemeteries on foreign soil. Most of these are imposing in size and adorned with great monuments and statuary but their most conspicuous feature is their immaculateness—itsself an aspect of democratic culture. The impressively landscaped ground with its perfectly kept graves and regularly scrubbed stones dignifies the common soldier as it legitimates his death.

America's "bad victories," unlike its good ones, were controversial at the time they were achieved and are ambivalently remembered. The Perry Peace Memorial, on Lake Erie, Andrew Jackson's statue across from the White House in Lafayette Park, and the Battle of New Orleans site in Chalmette National Historical Park symbolize the War of 1812's high points, but are dissociated from its controversies and humiliating defeats. Baltimore's Battle Monument for the War of 1812—one of the nation's oldest war memorials—is far less notable than Fort McHenry commemorated as the site that inspired "The Star-Spangled Banner." To the west, impressive monuments (including the Alamo and the San Jacinto Monument), are almost forgotten today "Hiker" and "Rough Rider" statues and the memorial commemorating the sinking of the *USS Maine* (1898) in Havana, Cuba, were erected in the early decades of the twentieth century, but few Americans are familiar with these monuments or find them stirring.

One of America's several so-called bad wars the Vietnam War, ended in defeat; but defeat alone does not account for the new forms its memorials assumed. The most prominent, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., lists on its black marble walls all 58,000 dead. It is the first national monument to elevate the individual above the cause. Later, public pressure forced the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts to identify the war on the monument's wall and to place on a nearby site a statue of soldiers with the American flag.

The new Vietnam monuments expressly affirm the ideal of gender and racial equality. The inclusion of a black soldier in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial statue symbolizes the many African-American men who died, while the inclusion of a black nurse in a nearby Vietnam Women Memorial statue represents the many African-American women who served. Elsewhere in Washington stands the African-American Civil War Memorial commemorating black soldiers who fought to secure the Union. Across the Potomac River, in Arlington Cemetery, is the Memorial to Women in Military Service to America.

Nowhere are minorities more vividly recognized, however, than in the many memorials dedicated to the Korean War between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. The Korean War Veterans Memorial on the Mall in Washington includes 19 stainless-steel statues of white and black combat troops, and a 164-foot wall of polished black granite with 2,400 faces of male and female, black and white support personnel. This structure, along with its local variants, is at once a return to and departure from the traditional genre. Its life-size statues, all armed, repudiate the pacifist bias of many Vietnam War memorials, while it greatly extends the recognition of the nation's minorities. The will to commemorate the "forgotten war"—as the Korean War is popularly known—and broader efforts to

incorporate forgotten people into the mainstream of American society are both manifestations of a late twentieth-century culture of inclusion.

At the turn of the twenty-first century the war memorial remains part of the symbolism of political order, its visitation on part of the liturgy of public commitment. As much as any other form of commemoration, it is the vehicle by which the nation's legacy is sustained.

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(Oxford Guide to American Military History)