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The Viet Nam Wars
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Final Paper

The Function of Memorials: Washington D.C. and Bishkek

It is practically impossible for one to visit the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington D.C. without being moved. The memorial is designed to instill one with a sense of the magnitude of the conflict, along with the enormity of the sacrifice of the soldiers who fought in it. As you enter to look upon the granite walls of names, it is almost as if you are temporarily joining the fallen in their graves, acknowledging them and then returning to reality. When observing this monument, it quickly becomes clear that one of its most powerful and controversial elements is its lack of overt patriotism. There are no American flags or other patriotic symbols in the original memorial. Instead, the sacrifices of the American soldiers are honored in the simplest way possible-naming them.

For my interview, I met with Vietnam War veteran Terry A. Williamson. Mr. Williamson served in the Marine Corps during the war, and currently serves as president of the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. During our interview, our conversation about the memorials in Washington D.C. and Philadelphia was particularly illuminating. Consequently, I believed that looking at the function of the memorial in Washington D.C. was the perfect way to expand upon the discussions with Mr. Williamson. At another point in our interview, Mr. Williamson was discussing the lessons that needed to be learned from Vietnam and that memorials were the perfect place for

these lessons to be passed on to the next generation. I saw this idea manifested in a memorial to Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan that I had recently visited in Kyrgyzstan, and noticed multiple parallels between the two memorials. In this paper, I will look at the role of the memorial in the three ways that Mr. Williamson saw it- as a place for veterans, as a place for the public and future generations to understand and remember the war, and finally as a way to teach people about the lessons from previous wars.

When I first asked Mr. Williamson what his opinion was on the role of memorials, his initial response was that memorials were for veterans. The idea for building the memorial, along with the funding for it, came from Vietnam veterans. This prompts one to ask: How did the Vietnam Veterans Memorial help veterans? In Mr. Williamson's mind, the memorial provided a venue for veterans to meet other veterans and share experiences. During special occasions, most notably Veterans Day, the memorial would provide a meeting point for veterans of the Vietnam war to connect. Mr. Williamson described memorials as a "spiritual" place for "shared grieving" where veterans could reminisce about past experiences with the only other people who could truly understand them.

Mr. Williamson further emphasized the memorial as a place for discussion by noting the differing opinions among veterans regarding the war itself. Many veterans believe that the United States could have been victorious in the Vietnam War if certain drastic measures had been taken, such as the use of nuclear weapons and/or an invasion of North Vietnam. The gatherings of veterans at memorials allows for these discussions to occur naturally among the veteran community and promotes healing.

Mr. Williamson mentioned that although his assimilation back into American society was smooth, it was clear that his service in Vietnam was a taboo subject. No one in his hometown in Illinois wanted to hear about his service and it seemed as if American society as a whole wanted to move on from the long years of the conflict. The creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982 allowed veterans to speak about their experiences openly in many cases for the first time.

Mr. Williamson also credited the discussions around the Vietnam War among veterans as being bolstered by returning veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The similarities between the two conflicts helped to naturally connect the two groups of veterans. The connections between the two veteran groups helped solidify the memorial space as an area for collective discussions among veterans of both wars. Wars are naturally followed by memorials commemorating the fallen, meaning that the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial helped to “normalize” the war as “the deaths are made rational and the veterans are whole again, stronger for their expiated burden”.¹ The creation of the memorial in Washington D.C. allowed for the natural progression of the war into national memory that was so important among the veterans community. Vietnam veteran and poet Bruce Weigl writes that veterans came to the memorial to “make the memorial our wailing wall” that by tracing names in the granite they could “find what was left of ourselves”. Weigl further writes that the 57,939 names on the wall were “America’s longest, most vicious sin”.² Clearly, one of the primary concerns for

¹ Harry Haines, “‘What Kind of War?’: An Analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*, 3:1 (March 1986), p.17.

² Bruce Weigl, Welcome Home *The Nation* 235:549, November 17, 1982

veterans was remembering their fallen comrades in arms and the memorial provided the ideal place to remember them alongside other veterans. The “normalization” of the war was also extremely important because the Vietnam War had been so different from previous conflicts and the Vietnam memorial helped bridge the gap between these different conflicts.

Even though Mr. Williamson’s initial reaction was to focus on the memorial as a place for veterans, he later continued describing the value of the memorial as a place for the general public to understand and remember the war. The initial reaction of American society to the return of Vietnam veterans was at best dismissive. At worst, the image of veterans was one of drug-addicted murderers. While applying for jobs upon his return from the war, Mr. Williamson neglected to mention his Vietnam service so as not to hinder his chance of acceptance. All of these reactions showed that Americans wanted to move on from the conflict. However, leading up to the creation of the memorial there was a “tentative reassessment of the conflict in Vietnam through an expanding diversity of scholarly and popular works”³, which helped pave the way for the memorial. Visitors to the memorial were presented with the inarguable consequences of the war. As a result, interest from the general public regarding the events in Vietnam began to increase, and society became more and more accepting of the narratives from Vietnam. The creation of the memorial significantly expanded the reassessment of the conflict.

³ Kidwell, D. C. (2006). *Remembering and forgetting war: Vietnam memorials and public memory* (Order No. 3214790). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. (305318728). Retrieved from <https://ezproxy.haverford.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/305318728?accountid=11321>

One of the consequences of the memorial was that it was used by Ronald Reagan to promote healing. At the dedication of the memorial Reagan declared the time had come to move on, and that war veterans had fought bravely for democracy in Vietnam, and that that was something to be proud of. In another speech, Reagan acknowledged the “deep divisions” of the Vietnam era and claimed that the veterans of Vietnam had demonstrated “living love” for their country, their families and their fellow soldiers. He went on to say that the memorial acts as a “whispering voice that passes gently through the surrounding trees and to out across the breast of our peaceful nation”.⁴ In these speeches we see how the Vietnam memorial was portrayed at this time by the highest levels in the government. Therefore, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial provided an avenue for healing and understanding among the American people about the experience in Vietnam. With the creation of the memorial, there was a consensus that the country needed to work through and move on from the divisive years of the Vietnam War.

As president of the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Mr. Williamson was clearly invested in making sure that the Philadelphia memorial had long term funding. One of the reasons Mr. Williamson believed this to be so important was that he believed future generations needed to be able to understand and remember the fallen soldiers and the war long after all participants in the conflict had passed on. For Mr. Williamson, the memorial functioned as a way to keep alive the memory of the fallen in the minds of the general public. For the Philadelphia memorial, this involved materials

⁴ Ronald Reagan. Remarks at the Veterans Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. November 11, 1988

that detailed the lives of deceased soldiers in order to make clear to visitors that real Americans sacrificed their lives in the Vietnam War, not simply unknown names on a wall.

During our interview, Mr. Williamson talked about the importance of the memorial as a way to learn from past mistakes of previous conflicts. In the Vietnam War, the American military did make many mistakes. For example, Mr. Williamson talked extensively about the North Vietnamese and their battle philosophy of “You cannot kill enough of us[to win]”. America underestimated the will of the North Vietnamese; there was also a further lack of understanding to the true nature of the war in that it was civil in nature. These issues hampered military efforts in Vietnam considerably. Even though the United States failed in its objectives in Vietnam, these lessons can provide Americans with important lessons for future conflicts. However, instead of showcasing strategic information, memorials teach us about the inevitable human cost in war that never justifies any alleged benefits.

Mr. Williamson drew many parallels between his experiences in Vietnam and the contemporary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In his mind, these contemporary wars could have been avoided if Americans had more thoroughly understood the Vietnam War and its context. In both wars, the United States was, in most cases, fighting a counterinsurgency, which involved combating enemies who did not wear uniforms or march in formation, which made them even more deadly. At the start of the war in Vietnam, expectations were high for the American military and many believed that the war would be a short affair. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there were similar

beliefs. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein was overthrown in a month of fighting after the initial invasion. Yet the conflict has continued to this day as the United States grapples with factions that oppose the government of Iraq. Similarly, the United States invaded Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11 attacks and quickly overthrew the Taliban government. However, the Taliban fighters then regrouped and have launched an insurgency that continues to this day. Mr. Williamson believes that our long conflict in Vietnam should have taught us that wars against committed enemies who are fighting in their home territory can be extremely difficult.

While Mr. Williamson was discussing the lessons that are learned from war, I was reminded of a memorial that I had visited in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan that was dedicated to the fallen Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan. It is important to understand that the memorial was built after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1996 and therefore represents an attempt for the country of Kyrgyzstan to grapple with its past association in Soviet conflicts. The inscription at the base of the memorial reads “Памяти Павших в Афганистане (1979-1989 ГГ.) ...Люди, не забывают уроки прошлого”⁵ which translates to “In memorial to the Fallen in Afghanistan (1979-1989)...People, do not forget the lessons of the past”. Behind the statue of two soldiers is the inscription of all the Kyrgyz soldiers who were killed in the conflict. This idea of learning lessons was echoed in Mr. Williamson’s thoughts about the war in Vietnam and its consequences.

One of the reasons that these memorials are similar comes from the parallels in the nature of the two wars. This war lasted for more than nine years, compared to the

⁵ See Figure 1

nineteen years that America was in Vietnam. Similar to the United States in Vietnam, the Soviets expected to spend six months to a year in Afghanistan to stabilize the government they placed in power. The Soviet war in Afghanistan is known as the “Soviet Union’s Vietnam War” due to its strong resemblance to the American war in Vietnam. The experience of Soviet veterans returning from Afghanistan was extremely similar to that of American soldiers returning from Vietnam. The military failures in Afghanistan made people dismissive of veterans and their service. Overall, the war was an extreme drain on resources for the Soviet Union, which ultimately contributed to its collapse in 1991. The inscription on the memorial in Bishkek makes clear the notion that memorials are meant to instruct future generations on the lessons learned from war. The directness of the inscription in the memorial showcases the importance of remembering the fallen. The inscription at the memorial acts as a plea to the observers to take into account the sacrifices of the past into consideration when thinking about engaging in future conflicts. The physical similarities between the memorials in Bishkek and Washington D.C. speaks to their identical purpose of informing the public about the lessons of the wars. Each memorial is situated in an important public place in order to more effectively inform: Ata-Turk Park in Bishkek and the National Mall in Washington D.C..

In conclusion, memorials are sacred place that hold value for a variety of purposes. They inform, they connect and most importantly they keep the past alive in living memory. Memorials serve as ageless reminders of the sacrifices of previous generations and as such should be recognized for the vital role they serve in society. Initially, memorials are most important to the participants of the war they remember, but

as time goes on the role of the memorial is expanded to include the entire nation. It is clear that memorials have a deep impact on the national consciousness. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. is one of the most visited sites in Washington D.C. and is included among other important national artifacts including the Lincoln Monument. This integration shows the power of the Vietnam memorial in American consciousness. In my conversations with Terry Williamson I saw the power that the creation of memorials can have and will continue to have. Mr. Williamson emphasized the power that memorials can have in society and it is has never been clearer to me that this is the truth.



Figure 1

Inscription at the base of the memorial to the Soviets in Afghanistan

Reads: Памяти Павших в Авганистане (1979-1989 ГГ.) ...Люди, не забывают уроки прошлого” which translates to “In memorial to the Fallen in Afghanistan (1979-1989)...People, do not forget the lessons of the past”

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Reflection Paper

Reflections on the Interview Process and Experiences

I wanted to preface this paper by saying that in my years at Haverford I had never done this kind of assignment before. I can remember during the first day of class when I was hearing about this assignment thinking “This sounds interesting”. I was glad to have the opportunity to interview these Vietnam veterans which seemed to me unique.

It was only much later that we began the process of getting in contact with our chosen interviewee: Terry Williamson. This process seemed to drag on for a very long time. It took quite a while for Terry to respond to our emails asking to meet and when he did respond and offer opportunities to meet these were too few and did not fit at all into our schedule especially given the half hour drive time to Terry’s house. Therefore we agreed to wait until after Thanksgiving to conduct our interview. Finally we were able to meet with Terry on November 30th at his home. It was a great experience overall. Going into the interview I was extremely nervous as I had never interviewed anyone properly before let alone someone like Terry who was a longtime successful reporter and former Marine. However, there was nothing to be worried about. We had plenty of questions to go through which seemed to be very helpful to the discussion. Even better, we were able to improvise our own questions which made the interview feel more like a dialogue. There were several times when Terry said something that was very interesting to me

and I would try to go into this topic more deeply. After we went through our questions, we asked if Terry had any memorabilia and he showed us various artifacts including his boots from Vietnam, combat helmet, and a Chinese grenade (disarmed thankfully) all of which was extremely interesting. As we left, I told Terry sincerely how much we appreciated his help and how it was a wonderful experience.

Then disaster struck, as we were leaving I remember telling Joseph how I had this irrational fear that we had recorded nothing. It turned out to not to be so irrational because that is what happened. I was devastated. It was my fault in the end since I had only pressed the record button once despite previously testing it successfully. Luckily for us, Terry had had this happen to him before when he worked as a journalist so he was more inclined to grant us a follow up phone call. I managed to set up the call to be recorded on my computer and we were able to go more in depth on the role of the memorial in remembering the war among the veteran community a topic I was interested in exploring further. I disliked the more impersonal nature of an over the phone interview but overall it was a concise and extremely valuable conversation.

Overall, I feel like I overcame a hurdle about interviews, learning that it is not as scary as it might seem, though I will forever be paranoid about recording devices. I honestly had a great time interviewing Terry much more than I would have thought and I would consider it a highlight of the class that I was able to experience this.