

A Wall Honoring Not Only Vietnam Veterans

By James Reston Jr.

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HUME, Va. — The Vietnam Veterans Memorial that New York City is planning for lower Manhattan is an admirable gesture. But why just for veterans? Why not a memorial for the entire Vietnam generation?

The design — a plain wall of glass brick etched, inside, with veterans' words written from Vietnam and letters sent to them from home — is too narrow a view of that war. Ultimately, such a monument is doomed to be a forgotten place. The test of a good monument is whether it means something in a hundred years.

Washington, after all, has given Vietnam veterans a shrine. Its inspiration lies in its ambiguity, for it encourages one to ponder the enormous cost of human life without addressing the issue of whether the cost was justified. Veterans, regardless of their support or loathing of their war, have rightly embraced the memorial as their own. It is difficult to imagine that a second memorial will upstage the first.

New York should go beyond Washington's achievement and put its mind to a broader, different statement. It is often overlooked that between 1964 and 1973, only 2.5 million men out of an eligible 26 million ever fought in Vietnam. To make New York's monument, the city's only tangible public memorialization of the

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war, a tribute to a fraction of the generation perpetuates old wounds rather than advancing reconciliation. Throughout those years, elements of the generation were pitted one against another. Veterans were set against resisters in the streets. Prisoners of war were set against self-exiles in Canada. Even conscientious objectors in jail were set against conscientious objectors who avoided jail, just as starved officers on the battlefield were set against the pot-smoking "grunts." Why must that same rancorous division, deliberately promoted by the nation's political leadership, now be cut into glass for all time?

A great moral chart was devised during the Vietnam years, with hot arguments about what a young American should do when faced with an undeclared war in a primitive, faraway place where American security was

scarcely involved. Perhaps the veterans were the ultimate losers in that impossible situation and so deserve special tribute now. But the impossible choice scarred all 26 million eligible men in many complicated ways, whether they will all admit it or not. Those who resisted the war, those who by hook or crook avoided the unpleasantness, and quite a few women as well, were deeply alienated by the Vietnam experience.

The Vietnam generation, we must hope, will always be different. The sacrifice of the soldiers was not the only sacrifice. The victims were not only the dead and the wounded.

In thinking about a Vietnam memorial, we may draw a parallel with Civil War statues, for they raise the question of whether they promoted reconciliation or romanticized the nation's division. Most of those statues

honor the respective causes as just and noble, but they have little meaning today, except to arouse a longing for antebellum chivalry in a few esoteric Southern circles.

The Vietnam War was also interne-cine, and what is needed is not a public park that says, by implication, that the soldier's sacrifice was more poignant or pointless, more romantic or tragic, more noble or more brutalizing than the lot of his brother.

In that wall then, alongside the best of the veterans' poems and letters, why should not the sentiments of the resister and the exile and the perpetual graduate student be represented, as well as a few key documents and a few relics that defined the dilemma of the whole generation? Why not honor the moral as well as the physical courage of the generation? Interspersed among the heartfelt letters of all elements of the generation might be such relics as the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, a sharpened bamboo stake, a Westmoreland troop request, a Zippo lighter, a stone from the Hue Citadel, a lottery number, a remnant of a fuselage, a sign from the "Hanoi Hilton" (a P.O.W. camp), a Medal of Honor citation, a shroud from a Buddhist monk's robe, a marijuana pipe, a national service ribbon, a leaflet from the protest of 500,000, Jimmy Carter's pardon declaration.

If there is to be a panorama for meditation on the nature of Vietnam, let it encompass the whole national experience. □

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