

HAIL BLIND DEVOTION

by James Reston, Jr.

There's a monumental competition going on in Washington that has nothing to do with balanced budgets or presidential politics. It has to do with, well, monuments. Every war, it seems, has to have one, and it's all the fault of one immensely popular and profoundly moving monument: the Vietnam Veterans memorial.

Other wars are envious of Vietnam. It is as if that dirty little kid down the block slipped under the fence and stole all the glory. Now the proper folks want their due. After thirteen, tortuous years when one design after another was rejected and the original competition winners sued the organizers, the Korean War Veterans Memorial was dedicated with military flourishes last week near the Lincoln Memorial. At the same time, construction has begun at the gates of the Arlington Cemetery for a monument to women in the military. Last year, after city planners turned it down and then an Act of Congress overturned the decision, a statue honoring the few thousand nurses in Vietnam was unveiled down from Frederick Hart's statue of the Three Vietnam Soldiers. Discussions are well underway for another colossal World War II memorial, perhaps on the order of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, perhaps on Constitution Avenue just down from the White House. Can the Gulf War be far behind? The War of 1812? Remember the Maine? The hundredth anniversary of the Spanish American War rolls around in three years.

Of the sylvan acres encircling the Reflecting Pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial,

the Vietnam Memorial and the Korean War Memorial have gobbled up close to fourteen acres between them. South of the Vietnam Memorial, a proposal has been approved for a Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial. Behind this march to glory is an independent, federally funded, presidentially-appointed commission called the American Battle Monuments Commission which promotes and manages the construction of the World War I, World War II, and Korean War memorials and helps to smooth their way through the political process. Thus, we now have an entrenched quasi-governmental lobby within the government that advances the cause of glorifying past American military conflicts. Ironically, only with the Vietnam Memorial was this commission shut out of the design and approval process.

The war memorial business is getting out of hand. Why is the memorial to Iwo Jima, that colossal and most recognizable icon and symbol of World War II, which stands on a knoll across the river from the Lincoln Memorial, not enough? Is there some formula about Great Wars that they must have two memorials? Before the activity is over, the precious ground around the Reflecting Pool could start to take on the feel of the Gettysburg Battlefield, full of Victorian clutter.

The new Korean War Memorial is a testament, more than anything, to the power of veterans to glorify themselves. The Memorial's advisory board was once again in the hands of the generals, the colonels, the medal of honor winners. The old brass has taken over once again, recapturing a process they always ran before, except once. Even on the level of memorialization, Vietnam stands alone.

No law states that every armed conflict abroad deserves a permanent tribute in granite and steel along the avenues of Washington or within Washington's crowded monumental core. Instead, what gets built in Washington has been left to the anarchy of politics and money. Apart from the contributions of established veterans groups, the Korean War Memorial is brought to us largely by the generosity of the Hyundai Corporation and the Government of South Korea.

As the soul of the nation, the nation's capital should reflect the breath of the society's achievements. But coming to Washington is turning into a martial experience: a contemplation of wars won, lost, or stalemated. At least if one judges by the heroic monuments now being built, it is as if America recognizes only one type of hero. What happened to the American hero as scientist? As builder? As religious leader? As man of letters? As artist or musician? As explorer? If the monuments of a great capital are meant to be an expression of the nation's values, why is it only the warriors who are recognized? I would have thought that a monument to Martin Luther King would take precedence on the mall over the black revolutionary war patriots.

One wonders how the great Lincoln will breathe now, flanked as he is on both sides by two "books of the dead" from two nasty, inconclusive, foreign wars. (The Korean memorial features the latest in interactive necromancy. In the spirit of virtual reality, the families of those killed in action have been asked to send in a snapshot from the family album. At the entrance to the memorial, you punch in the name of a man killed in action, and up pops the intimate snapshot of the dead man.) The truth is that the closeness of the Korean and Vietnam memorials dilutes the importance of Lincoln and the American Civil War.

In about a half-hour's walk the visitor can contemplate the lessons of the Civil War, the Korean War, and Vietnam all at once. It will be the walking-around equivalent of changing channels on the television.

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The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is, by far, the most popular memorial in Washington. The brilliance of its conception is well-recognized, but it is often forgotten that a jury of internationally recognized artists and architects chose the famous Maya Lin design. Thus, the artistic conception and the message were always intertwined from the beginning. How Vietnam was remembered in Washington was, by implication, a matter too subtle and too incendiary to leave to the generals and the colonels. They were in disrepute, after all.

The controversy that developed over the Wall---the 'Black Gash of Shame' or the 'Book of the Dead' as its detractors called it---is also well-known. But it is little appreciated that the Wall was only built after a political compromise to add Frederick Hart's Three Vietnam Soldiers at the entrance to the Wall. Without the poignant, realistic human figures, where the coppery skin shimmers and where the veins, the fingernails, the dog tags, and even, in certain conditions, the tears of the three men can be seen, there would have been no Wall.

Since the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial in 1982---the year the first legislation for a Korean War Veterans Memorial was proposed in Congress---over 40 Vietnam memorials have been built around the country, and in one fashion or another, they all mimic the strange hybrid of their Washington progenitor. All accent tragic loss, and most contain realistic figures of the human form in battle dress. The influence of the Wall's concept has been international as well. Last month, to commemorate the bloody battle of Okinawa in World War II, a memorial was unveiled where black granite tablets contain the names of all the dead, American and Japanese.

Sculptor Frederick Hart argues that the addition of his Three Soldiers to the Vietnam Memorial marked a signal moment in American public art. "It established the need for the human figure in public sculpture, after decades when only the abstract designs of the private art world were built in public places. Through history, people relate and identify with the human face." But the power of the Vietnam memorial is the combination of the abstract and the realistic, evoking a mood that perfectly reflects the essence of the Vietnam experience.

The Vietnam Memorial is essentially amoral. No inscriptions about tragedy or loss or noble service to country tell the visitor what to think. This very absence of exhortation is the essence of its emotional power. While it is technically called a "veterans" memorial, the Wall represents the very thing against which Vietnam resisters protested: the enormous, pointless loss of innocent life.

When I go to the Wall to revisit the name, Ronald Ray, I'm not told what to think about his death, only to remember how we were bunkmates together in our training to be

intelligence officers, how he had a spat with a boorish colonel later over whether he would play for the softball team in our little unit in Hawaii and volunteered for Vietnam in a huff, how he poked his head up a little too high in Hue when the North Vietnamese swept past his tiny compound during the Tet offensive. Later, I would have a spat with the same colonel, and I too would volunteer for Vietnam. But I was talked out of it: my passion to leave paradise for war was not as great as Ron's.

I don't think I would like to see a video snapshot of Ron now, with other tourists gawking over my shoulder, frozen there in time when we were both twenty five years of age and both so vulnerable to empty rages and empty calls to duty. It's a matter of privacy.... and decency.

The Wall became a Vietnam generation memorial. It is the focal point for reconciliation between the soldiers and the resisters, and between the Vietnam generation and the older generation that forced upon it a terrible choice. Because I was both a soldier and a protester, I welcome this healing, this broadening. Because Vietnam remains undigested history---partly because politicians did not have the courage or wisdom to enact a formal reconstruction after that divisive war---the memorial remains alive and relevant. Many members of that generation are still hurting, or are being hurt, by that war...like Bill Clinton. (But Clinton whose standing on military sacrifice is so weak for his own generation's war, is pandering to the chauvinism of the Korean and World War II generations, but it does not wash.) To reflect upon the torment of divisive war, the wall remains the place to go. A piece of architecture and sculpture became more than it was originally intended to be.

But the memorial left one painful legacy: the established veterans organizations, dominated as they are by World War II and Korean veterans, were deeply unhappy. The Vietnam Memorial (and the Vietnam War itself) had destroyed the principles of obedience, of unquestioning service, of the nobility of the supreme sacrifice.

The Korean War Memorial is meant to redress this hurt. Perhaps it is meant to do more: to dilute and neutralize the experience of Vietnam. On either side of the Reflecting

Pool, with Lincoln sitting in judgment, the memorials engage in a kind of dialectic.

The planners of the new memorial had a problem. The Korean War was the war of the Silent Generation. Its veterans were neither overly proud nor deeply wounded. Short and violent though it was, killing as many Americans in three years as Vietnam killed in thirteen years, the Korean War, nevertheless, did not destroy a generation. It was not so much undigested as forgotten history.

In planning their memorial, the taste of the Korean advisory board ran to old-fashioned, pre-Vietnam patriotism, and Congress accommodated them with legislation for a memorial with a traditional, narrow purpose.

“We have tried to give the veterans here what we could not give them with the Vietnam memorial,” Kent Cooper, the architect of record for the Korean War memorial. “We are not glorifying war, but esteeming the honor of service to country. That is what the vets cried out for.” Mr. Cooper refers to the two memorials as the yin and the yang. “This is a monument to blind devotion. The Korean War Veterans Memorial is in some ways a tribute to simpler times.”

The architect’s sentiment is reflected in his message. One approaches the space along a winding, cobblestone pathway. In a triangular garden, stationed amid silver lindens and juniper and granite slabs---initially, red bayberry was proposed to symbolize a field of blood and distressed sycamore trees were supposed to simulate the battlefield---a column of 19 stainless steel figures looms on the right. Clad in ponchos, suggesting harsh conditions, carrying an assortment of weapons and walkie-talkies, projecting the hue of rifle barrel, their alert faces are grim, full of tension and fear, devoid of any jubilation. They are, indeed, larger than life, humanoids about eight feet tall who are most impressive when they are seen at a distance rather than close-up. The first figure warns the visitor of danger ahead, with his hand extended to ‘stay back.’ Politically and militarily correct, the figures represent the races and the branches of service that fought in Korea.

Unlike the shocked immobility of the three Vietnam figures, this determined column of GI Joes is moving forward, up a slight incline towards its goal: the American flag. There is nothing vulnerable about these soldiers. They are impersonal, opaque, overtly ghost-like, but their humanity is not important: this is a tribute to military action itself. Their mission is undefined, but that is irrelevant, for they are unquestioning. Only sentiments of duty and country draw them forward.

On a wall behind the column...a wall again!...random faces of GIs and their supporting units are sandblasted into black California granite. The impressions come from the Archives, real faces of real people interspersed with the occasional pagoda and a tank. These images have the feeling of clippings strewn around on a floor, raw material in search of a theme.

At the top of the incline, where the visitor attains the goal of the flag, a slogan provides a warning, ponderous and menacing, above the statistics of the war's casualties: FREEDOM IS NOT FREE. And then, you turn, and there, at your feet, inscribed in granite, is the dialectic with Vietnam:

OUR NATION HONORS HER UNIFORMED SONS AND DAUGHTERS
WHO ANSWERED THEIR COUNTRY'S CALL TO DEFEND A COUNTRY
THEY DID NOT KNOW AND A PEOPLE THEY HAD NEVER MET.

Beyond the flag is a reflecting pool of moving water, bordered by the statistics of loss. In the vicious three years of the Korean War 54,246 were killed. The immense numbers of captured and wounded are etched beside the statistic of the dead. Above these daunting numbers, there is the menacing and ponderous inscription:

FREEDOM IS NOT FREE.

It is true that these soldiers did not understand why they were there. Harrison Salisbury wrote about them: "They did not know anything about the web of deceit and diplomacy, the power plays, the politics of war." Just as there is no image of Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon or Robert McNamara or Henry Kissinger at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial---although they are present in spirit---the decision makers of Korea are not present at the new memorial. There is no mention of the excesses of Douglas MacArthur, the unnecessary provocations beyond the Yalu that brought the Chinese into the war, the loose talk by Harry Truman about dropping another A bomb on the Chinese hordes.

The theme for the memorial's dedication last week was "A Victory Remembered." It is bad enough when Hollywood distorts history, as with the Dallas assassination, and historians have to work for years to redress the damage. But here the message is in granite and steel. Historians are in wide agreement that only one victor emerged from the bloody stalemate of Korea, and that was Joseph Stalin. It was he who encouraged his puppet, Kim Il Sung, to invade South Korea and he who ultimately succeeded in pitting his two major adversaries, China and the United States, against one another, at great cost to both and little cost to himself.

It was also said that Korea was the last war of the footsoldier. But that too will be part of the dialectic. It may be that Korea is the last war where the footsoldier did not question the validity of the mission and allowed himself to be a ghostly figure against a hostile landscape.

"In their vanity," wrote Lewis Mumford about the monuments of cities, "[the eminent and the powerful] seek a petrified immortality: they write their boasts upon tombstones; they incorporate their deeds in obelisks. They place their hopes of remembrance in solid stones joined to other solid stones, forgetful of the fact that stones deserted by the living are even more helpless than life that remains unprotected and unpreserved by stones."

What if nobody comes to this monument? I asked the Commissioner of Fine Arts in Washington a few weeks ago as the finishing touches were being applied to the landscape.

"Then we'll just have to live with it." he replied.

