

Q&A with James Reston, Jr.

A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial

What inspired you to write about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial?

The roots of this book reach back to my own service in the US Army (1965–1968), as I sought to come to terms with my involvement in a dubious and possibly immoral enterprise, and as I dealt with the shock of losing a comrade during the Tet Offensive in January 1968. His fate could easily have been my own. Those three years as a soldier gave me a deep and abiding empathy for any soldier in harm's way, regardless of the rightness or wrongness of the conflict.

Like many soldiers of that generation, I turned against the war while I was still in the service. Afterward, perhaps by way of penance, I became deeply involved with the amnesty movement that sought relief and return for the tens of thousands who fled the United States to avoid the military draft.

The issue of reconciliation and reconstruction after divisive war has been a constant theme of mine over the years, present in four of my books and many articles. The struggle over the building of a memorial to the Vietnam War always intrigued me. It was as if the war was being fought all over again on the turf of memory and art. Beyond that, the protagonists are fascinating.

How did the Vietnam Veterans Memorial come to be?

The memorial was the inspiration of a wounded veteran named Jan Scruggs who thought a memorial would restore respect for Vietnam veterans who answered the call to service when so many young men of his generation avoided service. To him a memorial would be a “powerful symbol of reconciliation.” But what kind of memorial was appropriate for the first war in history that America lost?

Through Scruggs's determination an organization called the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund was founded that lobbied Congress for a site on the National Mall, raised money, and sponsored what was then the largest design competition ever held to select a designer for the memorial.

A jury of eight distinguished architects and artists evaluated 1,421 anonymous entries in the spring of 1981. Their selection was a simple design of a black granite wall cut into the earth with the names of the dead listed chronologically beneath the inscription “In Memoriam.” It was revealed to be the work of a twenty-one-year-old Yale undergraduate named Maya Lin. It was initially greeted as a work of genius.

What was the source of the controversy over the design?

The fact that Lin's design was so different from other memorials worked both for it and against it. Art critics praised it for its simplicity, its naturalness, and its lack of jingoism. Others, led by a group of well-connected, forceful veterans, were disappointed and insulted. There was no American flag; no inscription about a soldier's valor; no mention of Vietnam at all. One veteran called it a "black gash of shame and sorrow." They did everything they could to scuttle the winning design and replace it with something more heroic . . . and they almost succeeded. Ultimately, they did manage to impose an entirely different work of art on the winning design: a classical sculpture representing three soldiers in combat gear, fashioned by another remarkable artist, Frederick Hart. Far from salving the wounds of the Vietnam War, the debate over the memorial seemed to open those wounds all over again.

Why was the Vietnam War so challenging to memorialize?

The Vietnam War forced Americans to make difficult choices about whether or how to serve their country. The issue pitted soldiers against protesters, sons against fathers, citizens against politicians, friends against friends, and veterans against veterans.

How then should a country begin a healing process after a failed, divisive war? From 1978 to 1984, this question was crystallized in a brawl over how to commemorate that war. It was an extraordinary, passionate fight between groups with different attitudes toward what some called the lost cause of the twentieth century and others called noble. It was also a fight between different notions about public art. It came to involve powerful forces in American politics and business, and it provoked debate over what constitutes honor and courage in times of national crisis. It prompted the question of how to thank the soldier who prosecuted the war, while at the same time to honor the protester who ultimately stopped it.

Why do you think the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is so popular with visitors today?

In its inscrutability, the simple V of black granite has transcended a specific war and risen to the universal. The memorial on the National Mall is no longer just about veterans and their loss and sacrifice, no longer just about Vietnam, but about all wars and all service to country and all moral opposition to governmental authority.

A doctor who treated Vietnam veterans with PTSD and brought them to the memorial shortly after it was completed was inspired to suggest the following Constitutional amendment: "Before any President may commit American forces to combat, and before any member of Congress may vote on a declaration of war, said President or member is required to read aloud the names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial." His suggestion is just one example of the powerful impact of visiting the memorial.

Why do you think readers should know this story?

The issue of reconciliation and reconstruction after a divisive war is timeless. Through the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and beyond, the period of peace after any war will be, and should be, a time for reflection, and hopefully, for renewal. To have a permanent physical space to ponder those life-and-death issues, a space that is almost sacred in feel, defines the brilliance of Lin and Hart's works. But there is also great value in revisiting the fierce struggle over divergent concepts of art and patriotism that brought their creations into existence.