

It all started with the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. Soon after completion of the "wall," the Korean War Memorial was dedicated in 1995. Almost a decade after that, President George W. Bush spoke at the completed memorial for World War II veterans and casualties in 2004. The monument to the veterans of World War I was dedicated only last year, 2024. It was as if, we were traveling back in time. The "wall" began a journey of honor and recognition in the form of monumental public art and statuary once Maya Lin's "gash" was complete.

Researching these four, the only one that gave me pause was the memorial to WWII. Two matters made me wonder. The first was that the men and women who served, fought, and died in WWII had two powerful memorials already. The sunken battleship Arizona in Pearl Harbor and the cemetery in Normandy, France. Each of these acts as a site of pilgrimage for those who served and a memorial to honor the dead for generations to come. Much like Gettysburg, the site of the battle and the memorial are one and the same. That there is no such place in Vietnam becomes poignant when you consider the crosses of Normandy or the watery grave in Hawaii.

The second matter giving pause for the WWII Memorial was the location. The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial and the Korean War Memorial are both in the Mall. They are in the Mall, but neither obvious nor in the center. The line that runs from Lincoln to Washington to Grant was still unobstructed by the addition of these two memorials. Even more the design of the Korean and Vietnam monuments seem almost camouflaged. The "wall" and the three servicemen for Vietnam are shielded by a stand of trees when you reach Washington's monument. The Korean War soldiers are literally walking through a forest. The proposal for the memorial to the veterans of WWII was the exact opposite.

The plan was to put the memorial directly in the line between Lincoln and Washington just beyond the reflecting pond. I distinctly remember groaning when I read of the intended location. The symmetry, the poetic space, the balance would be ruined. Grant and Lincoln form a conversation about war and sacrifice, madness and leadership. Lincoln and Grant gaze at each other; the only obstruction is Washington serving as both warning and inspiration. That there were other monuments in the Mall was not problematic from my perspective. Being placed in the Mall was not a concern, but where they were placed was important. That the clarity of Lincoln to Washington to Grant would be confused, disrupted, seemed wrong, certainly unnecessary.

Hence, I was a reluctant visitor to the WWII Memorial in DC. I was reluctant because I didn't want my fears to be realized and thus be conflicted about the value of the memory. My concerns were of little value compared to the sacrifice and loss embodied in the monument, so it was my intent to avoid it altogether on a recent visit to the capital. My plan was thwarted by wife who scheduled a night tour of the Mall. Never a fan of the bus tour, I was not enthusiastic. That it was at night made me even more skeptical.

Yet, suddenly, we stopped just beside the paths leading to the WWII Memorial. Getting out I could feel the resistance of my reluctance. But then I saw them. The names of the states.

Knowing what the stars meant, a symbol of a hundred dead. I saw the names of each state and the more than 4000 stars. The impact was immediate. This was a kind of Gettysburg. Walking from state to state I kept having flashes of the state monuments in Gettysburg. How it honors both confederate and union, how the casualties of war are in death no longer friend or foe but lie together in the shared ground of common fate. This new memorial seemed to resurrect the notion of common sacrifice. All the states were listed; all had stars.

The next day I returned and walked the memorial again. This time, though, a new impression was made. Not only was this memorial a kind of doubled healing, but it was also hidden like the other veteran memorials. It was a grand plaza with colonnades and ornaments. There were quotes like the Lincoln Memorial, so it lacked the minimalism and unadorned poetry of the "wall." Yet, like the wall, it was subterranean. Open to the sky, so not a cave, but below the line of sight so it did not break the view of Lincoln, the gaze of Washington.

What is more, the reflecting pool now terminated in a waterfall. Like the 9-11 Memorial to be built shortly after, the stagnant pond was now a flowing cascade bringing life to death. All these elements combined to make something so surprising. There were no statues, but it was heroic. It was grand, but it was also humble in its depth. It was as if the memorial was foundational, an inverted base.

Part of the injury for veterans of the Vietnam War is the second wound they received coming home. No parades. No demands to wear the uniform. Deep strife and anger met the returning soldiers of Vietnam. It was as if they needed heal from battle and their return from the battle. This was not the case of those who returned after V-Day and VJ-Day. They returned with "victory." The WWII Memorial could have drawn upon this part of America's collective memory. The site could have been designed to evoke celebration. And there are golden wreaths which do conjure glory, but that is it. No soldier rising; no artillery crashing; no image of "land, sea, and sky" except the land, water, and sky that was already there. The WWII Memorial seemed to take into account wounds of the Vietnam Veterans with a quiet modesty.

Yet, what brings the most light, what evokes the greatest memory, are the names of the states. It is as if we were truly united. The designer may have had no intent to conjure Gettysburg. And a part of me hopes it was not the intent. For in this way the memorial becomes poetic. The stars, the states, the subterranean base all speak to each other and let you hear your own memory.

THEY FOUGHT TOGETHER AS  
BROTHERS-IN-ARMS. THEY DIED  
TOGETHER AND NOW THEY  
SLEEP SIDE BY SIDE. TO THEM  
WE HAVE A SOLEMN OBLIGATION.

ADMIRAL CHESTER W. NIMITZ



