Shades of Memory: Reflections on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

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Abstract

Not much attention has been paid to the effect of the Vietnam War on America's national memory. American public are as divided over the rationale for and the conduct of the Vietnam War, as they are on the proper mode of honor and commemoration for the over fifty-thousand American soldiers who lost their lives in the war. The Vietnam War Memorial has elicited as much embrace as it has drawn flak. There is a split in the literature over the form that memorials should take. There are those who view memorial as a mourning tool and those who see it as a form of nation building. While individuals who are directly impacted by the war view memorials as a form of mourning, the state treats it as an opportunity for nationalistic glory. There is official co-option of the bodies of the fallen soldiers into national cemeteries and narratives. The immense depth of the emotion triggered by the Vietnam War has led to an alternative narrative pushed in opposition to the official narrative of collective memory. This alternative narrative has yielded to a reimagining of the Vietnam War Memorial and the reconstruction of its history. It is a reimagining that recognizes the existence of different shades of memory.
…I didn't want a monument, not even one as sober as that vast black wall of broken lives. I didn't want a postage stamp. I didn't want a road beside the Delaware River with a sign proclaiming: Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway. What I wanted was a simple recognition of the limits of our power as a nation to inflict our will on others. What I wanted was an understanding that the world is neither black-and-white nor ours. What I wanted was an end to monuments. (Culled from Hixson, 2000, p. 81) We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget (Arthur C. Danto, 1985, p. 152; as cited in Hixson, 2000, p. 66).

Introduction

Most public discourses and sentiments about the Vietnam War focus on the human and material losses that America suffered in the war. The United States committed fifteen years to the Vietnam War, deployed more than three million military personnel to serve in the war, and suffered 58,183 combat deaths and 303,713 wounded veterans (Michalowski & Dubisch, 2001). Yet, those were not the only losses America endured as a result of the Vietnam War; the Vietnam conflict also claimed a cultural casualty as well – "the national memory of the war" (Michalowski & Dubisch 2001, p. 10). The tragedy of the Vietnam War made it difficult for America to build a broadly shared memory about the meaning that the war has. Just as the reason for America's involvement in the war has been a subject of immense controversy, the debate over the appropriate form of its memorialization has generated no less debate (Lembcke, 1998). As iconic as it has become over the years, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) was, still is, and may well continue to be, a contested cultural and historical landmark.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated on November 11, 1982, seven years after the last American death in the Vietnam War. Prior to this great landmark national event, 150,000 spectators witnessed and applauded as 15,000 veterans marched before them (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). This event was spectacular not only for its deep and solemn significance, but also for its fanfare and ceremony. The solemnity of this dedication was underscored by the reading out of the names of all 57,939 Americans who lost their lives in the Vietnam War (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is currently the most visited site on the Washington Mall; "as many as 20,000 people walk by its walls everyday" (Hixson, 2000, p. 79). The Memorial's chevron design has become as popular and recognizable an American icon as the Statute of Liberty (Morrissey, 2000). There was a clear vision about what the memorial was to represent: "the dead, the veterans, and the sense of community that had made the war palatable to some Americans between 1957 and 1975" (Hass, 1998, p. 9).

What was however problematic and the subject of many public and private disagreement was what the death, the veterans, and the lost community suggested, and the manner of their representation (Hass, 1998).

This essay examines the place and meaning of war memorials, especially the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in a contested national narrative. To whom does a war memorial belong – the fallen soldiers and their surviving families or the state that sent them to war?

Contested Memory

There is a divide in the literature on the forms and functions of memorial – between those who view memorial as a mourning tool and those who see it as a form of nation building (Edkins 2003). While Winter (1995) and Cannadine (1981) see war memorials as a form of mourning and bereavement, Mosse (1990) sees the process as the making of a nationalist myth of war through military cemeteries and commemorative ceremonies. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial exemplifies the way a society absorbs past events that are not completely glorious and the memory of which creates controversy instead of harmony (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). A society decides how it remembers its significant historical events, and "how the past is commemorated through a country's war memorials mirrors what people want to remember, and lack of attention reflects what they wish to forget" (Mayo, 1989, p. 13). The veterans who worked to shape the meaning of the Vietnam War discovered that their struggles to commemorate one of America's long wars were met with "all of the conflicting emotions and ideologies expressed about the war itself. There was no consensus about what the names represented, about what to remember or what to forget" (Hass, 1998, p. 9). The Vietnam War was unique and differed from other wars for the following reasons:

(1). It was mired in deep and divisive political controversy;
(2). It was morally questionable; and
(3). It resulted in defeat and humiliation for the United States (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991).

As noted by Buzzanco (1986), America's strategic failure in Southeast Asia had a remarkable economic and moral impact. Military critics constantly warned that the costs and consequences of the Vietnam War were too high and detrimental to justify continued involvement.

Soon after the erection of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a heated controversy erupted regarding the Memorial's "seemingly minimalist, unheroic design" (Abramson, 1996, p. 684). But this is a design that suits the commemorative interest of the state. As observed by Correll (1991), by sacralizing armed violence and controlling questions of the material body, by obliterating and mystifying it, monuments and memorials produce the national, sovereign subject. In the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as observed by Abramson (1996), divisive and controversial struggle is by its chronicling in monumental form, sublimated and incorporated into American historical consciousness.

Varied criticisms of the war memorial have in differing ways conveyed their political and cultural aspects. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, though not offering any judgment on the politics of the war, has acquired ambiguous architectural interpretations. Abramson observes that some critics have:

stressed how the low, black, abstract walls violate the genre of heroic monumentality, how the walls' directionality relates contextually to the rest of the Mall, how their reflective surfaces psychologically engage the beholder, and how the listing of names emphasize the reality and individuality of each death (Abramson, 1996, p. 684).

Many see this apparent polysemous appreciation of this work of sculptural art as an American story, which is "in keeping with America's admirable tradition of reflective and interrogative patriotism", while others see it for its subversive value (Abramson, 1996, p. 688). Selling the idea of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial project to America was not an easy one; its negotiation process involved social, political, and cultural trajectories (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). The men and women who formed the core of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund were themselves in political disarray; some of them had protested after serving in the war, while others believed that the war was justified (Mayo, 1989). However, one thing unified them: "their desire to reclaim a modicum of recognition and social standing" out of a sense of "outcast social position as survivors of a deeply unpopular war" (Hass, 1998, p. 10). The negotiation process for the idea of a veterans' memorial, according to Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz (1991) had to deal with the following problems:

(1) The social problem of fixing painful parts of the past (a military defeat, a generation of unredeemed veterans) in the public consciousness,

(2) The political problem of commemorating an event for which there is no national consensus, and

(3) The cultural problem of working through and against traditional expectations about the war memorial genre (p. 378).

Memorials as National Imagining

The issue of commemoration is a significant form of the sociology of culture because it borders on the way society imagines its past (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). Following in the Durkheim tradition, current approaches to the problem of commemoration highlight the way commemorative objects honor society's former glories and fames. Be it the American Civil War or the Vietnam War, the war serves as a legitimizing tool and as a moment of "epistemological and political crisis: for national culture" (Correll, 1991, p. 142). The might and limitations of a society are demonstrated in war, and these qualities are often mirrored in the memorials of its wars (Mayo, 1988). However, attempts by the state to commemorate war "unavoidably create a distinct political landscape" (Mayo, 1988, p. 62). Whether by its architectural design, its spatial location, or a combination of these and other considerations, a war memorial, observes Barber (1949) is a "social and physical arrangement of space and artifacts to keep the memories of persons who participated in a war *sponsored by their country* [emphasis added] (p. 65).

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has acquired a pilgrimage status and has been referred to as a shrine and a sacred site (Morrissey 2000, Hixson, 2000). Flowing from this shrine and sacred aura is a form of order that the state utilizes as a form of social management (Mayo, 2000). Identifying the difference between the sacred and the profane, Durkheim (1965) notes that the sacred – religious thought – guides personal moral life. It enables a place to have a separate spiritual meaning in the midst of chaos, and this sacredness surpasses unique individual memories and experiences (Robinson, 1977). Some degree of consensus or communal notion of good is therefore, necessary for a place to express spiritual or sacred sentiment. Conversely, the profane, argues Eliade (1959), is characterized by its amorphous meaning in which people possess fragmented life memories. A memorial imposes meaning and order out of a cacophony of reactions and interpretations which the event memorialized generates. Both Tuan (1980) and Mayo (1988) see it is an instrument of both social and political control.

Memorial debates are captured by the state that uses it to reinforce a narrative of the nation (Edkins, 2003). The state is able to do this by co-opting "the bodies of the fallen in its search for closure" (p. 91). National tragedies offer the state the opportunity to articulate nationalist remembrances in a way that advances the subtle political interest of the state. A good example of this national appropriation of memory is how the George W. Bush Republican administration made a huge political capital out of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. A tragic war of colossal economic proportion was launched in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The war rhetoric was anchored on the need to do justice to the memories of victims of the 911 terrorist attacks.

To achieve this, deaths are retrospectively appropriated by the state to serve a national narrative (Edkins, 2003). The memories of the victims of 911 became common embellishments in Mayor Rudy Giuliani's 2008 presidential campaign rhetoric. The drafting of the dead into national narratives treats the fallen soldiers as state property and therefore, as Edkins (2003) notes, the process and location of their burial are decisions that the state makes.

Memorials and monuments have become powerful political tools that have been used to achieve a collectivization of what are essentially individual sacrifices. Describing these practices as public memory, Sandage (1993) argues that our sometimes collective memory is in reality "a political sense of our past" (p. 135). Memorials and monuments have come to be the embodiments of nationalistic values rather than centers of individuated sacrifices and memories. They became rallying points for civil right activists and other policy protesters, especially during the civil rights struggle. On Easter Sunday 1939, Marian Anderson sang to an integrated crowd of seventy-five thousand at the Lincoln Memorial: "My country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, to thee we sing" (Sandage, 1993. p. 135). Thus, the memorial is apostrophized and given a personality that transcends the individual memories that it embodies.

The Lincoln Memorial, named after the first president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, was designed as a commemoration of the struggles and sacrifices, including the revolutionary wars, for the realization of the American project; yet, the memories of those who gave up their lives are summed up in the sovereign.

Equally notable is the 1963 march in Washington for jobs and freedom when Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed his Dream from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where Marian Anderson had sung in 1939. The choice of the Lincoln Memorial as the venue for these protests speaks to the politics of memory in the American culture. As observed by Sandage (1993), in the vault of the hallowed, public space of the memorial, political and civil rights advocates perfected a difficult rite of mass politics, one that utilized the ambiguities of cherished American values to battle opposition, unite coalitions, and legitimate black voices in public politics.

Nations have fought wars for their survivalist and existentialist purposes. Every war waged by the state has been supported by rhetorical justifications often built on the national security interest of the state. By such rhetoric, the sovereign seeks to dominate the discourse and achieve legitimacy for the war (Edkins, 2003). However, national emotions, even for the most popular wars, are affected by the casualties and costs of war – the higher the death tolls and economic price of the campaign, the higher the disillusionment of the national population.

On the other hand, the Vietnam War resembled the other wars because "it called out in participants the traditional virtues of courage, self-sacrifice, and honor" (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991, p. 376). Representing these contrasts in a single monument creates a national ambivalence which only the political force of the sovereign is equipped to do. To deal with these reactions, the state engages in various efforts to assuage the feelings of the population. One of the ways it does this is through the sacral observances of the sacrifices of the war through national monuments and memorials (Correll, 1991). According to Correll (1991), "If war is the excess that dominant discourses produce to legitimate order, it is the role of the monuments to contain the records of crisis" (p. 142). And the sovereign seeks to control both.

In erecting war memorials and monuments, the valor and military might of the sovereign are celebrated over the individual sacrifices of the war heroes. Gillis (1994) regrets that even with the increased involvement of ordinary people in commemoration at various sites of memory, "nineteenth century memorializing was largely for, but not of, the people" because only kings, leaders, and war generals were memorialized, while the ordinary people in wars or revolutions were not remembered (p. 9). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is no exception.

Alternative Narratives

Although every war tends to generate accounts that attempt to personalize the experience of war and enable those writing the accounts the opportunity to experience vicariously the region and psychology of war, Vietnam is different from other American wars in the nature and variety of subjective narratives that it has produced (Rowe, 1986). Many accounts of the Vietnam War serve as alternatives to official documents, media perspectives, scholarly and popular interpretations (Rowe, 1986). This has resulted in some form of contested history of the war and a competition between the sovereign and the individuals for the domination of both the narrative as well as the commemorative space. There has emerged a revisionary desire that focuses on the redemption of the war and the release of the narrators from responsibility (Rowe, 1986). Such narratives are encouraged by the need to dismantle political mystification that continues to govern America's foreign policies and shape its cultural consciousness of Vietnam (Rowe, 1986). But it goes beyond Vietnam. Contested narrative has also appeared in post-September 11 discourses.

Following the terrorist tragedy on September 11, 2001, a discussion entitled "The Role of the History Museum in a Time of Crisis" was held at the Museum of the City of New York on October 4, 2001. According to Gardner and Henry (2002), a major crisis of conscience engaged participants at the discussions. At a time when rescue workers were still digging through the pile of rubble at ground zero in search of survivors or human remains, state bureaucracy was already articulating rhetoric that co-opted the dead into a national narrative. The insensitivity of this provoked a participant at the New York meeting into querying: "how could we even raise the question of preserving materials for posterity without appearing ghoulish, insensitive, or opportunistic?" (Gardner & Henry, 2002, p. 39).

Such is the paradox of tragic memory. The state and other establishment institutions surge into the forefront in memorializing the tragedies and losses of those whose loved ones died in those events. The agonies of the families and friends of those who lost their lives in such disasters are usurped for the material and instrumental purposes of the state and the system. There is a sensitive moral conflict requiring the balancing of the difficult questions raised by "the memorial materials springing up in public places all over the country when the task of preserving and protecting material seemed to conflict with its memorial uses" (Gardner & Henry, 2002, p. 39). The balancing is a most delicate and intricate one, made all the more so by its politics.

When the politics of memorial is not being fought on the timing of its material collection, it is being framed on what form it will take. Shanken (2002) recalls the debate over the best form of memorial for World War II (p. 130). Proponents of a living memorial criticized traditional memorials as "tawdry, 'monumental' monstrosities" (as cited in Reid 1944, p. 35). The public appropriation of memory serves to suit the convenience and purpose of the state and the society at the expense of the families directly traumatized by the tragedies. The ideological framing of the difference between traditional and living memorials focuses only on their consumptive and utilitarian values (Shanken, 2002). Traditional forms of memorials such as triumphal arches, statutes, obelisks, and other commemorative structures serve the sole purpose of memorials, while living memorials such as community centers, forests, libraries, and highways go beyond merely memorializing an event to serving society's public interests (Shanken, 2002). Making the choice of living memorial over traditional form is one that the state exploits its political interest to accomplish. Shanken (2002) rightly observes that:

Building a victory column or a triumphal arch was anathema at a moment when many Americans experienced a compelling drive to move on and to forget war and the society that had fought two of them in quick succession. To its sponsors, living memorials presented a way out of this dilemma, a means of folding the sacrifices of war into the pattern of democratic community life, gently kneading the past into the present, in the process altering the relation between public space and memory (p. 130).

As compelling as the living memorials argument may sound in terms of its utilitarian value, it still removes from the individuality of the losses they seek to commemorate by bringing memory into public space. How and when should the posters of missing persons be treated as "historic artifacts when their families might still be holding hopes that loved ones would be found alive?" (Gardner & Henry, 2002). The individual, to greater or lesser extents, owns and has control over the manner he or she memorializes "because he or she performs these practices in public or records them in other forms (in photographs, journals, memoirs, weblogs, etc.)" (Bleankey, 1990, p. 26). The individual became more assertive in memorial practices after the political and economic revolutions in the late eighteenth century "when the middle and working classes started to demand commemoration as part of a general movement to narrow the gap between the popular and the elite" (Gillis, 1994, p. 7). As John Bodnar (1992) notes, economic growth and the rise of the Democratic Party raised tension among classes, regions, and ethnicities, and resulted in a greater diversity of public commemoration and practices. There was a "decline in the single-minded focus on patriotism and national unity that had reached a peak in 1825 and an increase in more commemorative attention being given to local, state, and regional pasts" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 26). People saw the Fourth of July holiday as a chance to pursue leisure interests rather than the observance of patriotic commemoration, with "tavern frolics" and "disorderly, political picnics" in danger of overshadowing the "serious orations about moral and civic values" that also took place (Bodnar, 1992, pp. 26-27). All these have not only contributed to alternative account of Vietnam Memorial, they have also compelled a reimagining of it.

Reimagining the Vietnam Memorial

It cannot be contested that the Vietnam War has a restless memory; it continues to haunt the American imagination several years after its official end (Hass, 1998). American public commemoration has witnessed a radical change by the restive memory of the Vietnam War which "could not be expressed or contained in Maya Lin's powerful and suggestive design alone" (Hass, 1998, p. 2). The war presented varying notions of the nation, the soldier, the citizen and his or her patriotism, and the government (Hass, 1998). The deep and varied emotions which the war provokes make it difficult to achieve a system-based memorialization. Memories of the war are so individuated that hundreds of thousands of Americans are inspired to bring their own memorials to the wall (Hass, 1998). And they do that every day and time they visit the sacred wall.

Unfortunately, if war memorials are designed to fulfill the expectation that dead soldiers can be retired to a "stoic, martyred memory of heroism and sacrifice" then, the "liminal, contested place of the Vietnam War in American culture" has disrupted that expectation (Hass, 1998, p. 121). The unconventional, unexpected response to the memorial goes to demonstrate that the notions of patriotism and nationalism are continuing public negotiations even though the state sometimes behaves as if it is settled (Hass 1998). Conventional funerary and memorial culture in American tradition do not involve the offering of things. Flowers and flags are utilized for memorials, while "medals of valor and old cowboy boots are for mantels and attics" (Hass, 1998, p. 8).

As the exhibit contextualizes the tradition of leaving items within what it deems a uniquely American cultural and historical scene, "it omits the larger historical background and political circumstances that would explain the existence of the wall and why people leave objects there" (Bleakney, 1990, p. 115). Museums place objects on display in order to enhance the construction of narratives of the nation, which in turn instruct and shape visitors' perceptions and dedication to it (Bleakney, 1990, p. 113). At the Veterans Art Museum, the absence of attention to the larger political schema that precipitated and protracted U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the foregrounding of experience over history, and "the privileging of veterans' perspectives on the war all contribute to the construction of a quagmire aesthetic" (Bleakney, 1990, p. 127). It is a quagmire that requires a new paradigm.

There is no doubt that war memorials help in healing the pain of war loss. A fundamental component of this healing process is the construction of meaning. Out of inchoate and complex individual agony, collective meaning is created through the ritual process (Michalowski & Dubisch, 2001). However, for a lot of Americans – civilian and in uniform – the Vietnam War produced a void of meaning (Michalowski & Dubisch, 2001). Those who could not believe bureaucratic rhetoric that justified the war or the wisdom of its strategy, as well as those who later could not reconcile their imagination of America with the idea of losing a war, had to "redeploy the conceptual tools of their culture to construct new understanding" (Michalowski & Dubisch, 2001, p. 178). But this new understanding required both the construction and the reconstruction of history.

The (Re) Construction of History

The walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial serve as a monitor for many projections about the history of the Vietnam War and its outcome. Beyond its foregrounding of individual names and the embedded condemnation of war in that listing, the memorial does not take a stand on the specific debate about, and contested versions of, the Vietnam War. Hixson (2000) believes that a block of stone may be "a powerful text with many subtexts, or it may be an inert simplification of historical reality that assuages memory – it depends on the readership" (pp. 82-83). A lot of the current identification with the memorial smacks of historical revisionism. The memorial's location on the Washington Mall etches it within a nationalist discourse, limiting in many ways the discourse of memory it can offer (Hixson, 2000). It is hardly ever noted that in none of the discussions regarding the memorial are the Vietnamese people ever mentioned (Hixson, 2000). The reason for this is very obvious: "this is not a memorial to their loss; it does not even recognize that loss. They cannot even be named in the context of the Mall" (Hixson, 2000, p. 83). Important elements in this historical tragedy such as Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Henry Kissinger are also conspicuously absent in the memorial discourse. In the framework of this torrent of grief, the complex reasons why the lives represented by the inscribed names were needlessly lost are absent (Hixson, 2000). And this is more of a calculated than an accidental omission.

Also, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has acquired all of the trappings of a religious shrine with people bringing personal artifacts to deposit at the Wall as offerings. Hixson (2000) concludes that "this rush to embrace the memorial as a cultural symbol reveals not only the relief of voicing a history that has been taboo but also a desire to reinscribe that history" (p. 79). The process of achieving both has been fraught with cultural and ideological contrasts and contradictions, given the different forms of remembrances it contains. Specifically, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has generated two very different kinds of remembrance: one a revised historical narrative that seeks to rewrite the Vietnam War in a manner that announces American imperialism and the masculinity of the American soldier; the other, an intricate discourse of remembrance that has allowed the Americans affected by this war to "speak of loss, pain, and futility" (Hixson, 2000, p. 83). These two versions of remembrance were eloquently expressed in the politics of the 1992 presidential elections.

The election of Bill Clinton and Al Gore in 1992 as president and vice president of the United States respectively, has significance in the way the Vietnam War has come to be interpreted in the United States. Bill Clinton was a Vietnam War critic and resister. In the build up to the election, the then president, George H. Bush, had sought to impeach Clinton's patriotism by attacking his opposition to the Vietnam War. However, this strategy did not work because even among Vietnam veterans, Clinton got more support than Bush, polling forty-one percent as opposed to Bush's thirty-eight percent (An, 1997). According to An (1997), the American electorate refused to buy into an official construction of patriotism and the Republican attempt to make a solemn and sensitive historical event like Vietnam a political litmus test.

With a Vietnam War veteran as a running mate, the Clinton-Gore presidency represented a remarkable significance in the Vietnam War healing process among Americans: the American voters have endorsed the idea that honorable and patriotic people stood on both sides of the Vietnam War debate (An, 1997). Thus, the American electorate has recognized that different shades of memory exist.

Conclusion

America had not known any humiliation in war until its disastrous military campaign in Vietnam. Since the Vietnam debacle, much of the public discourse has been on the huge human and material loss that America suffered in the war. This of course is in addition to its punctured national pride. Not much attention has been paid to the effect of the Vietnam War on America's national memory. The same way the American public was divided over the rationale for and the conduct of the Vietnam War, there does not seem to have been any consensus on the proper mode of honor and commemoration for the over fifty-thousand American soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War Memorial has elicited as much embrace as it has drawn flak. There is a split in the literature over the form that memorials should take. There are those who view memorial as a mourning tool and those who see it as a form of nation building. While individuals who are directly impacted by the war view memorials as a form of mourning, the state treats it as an opportunity for nationalistic glory. There is official co-option of the bodies of the fallen soldiers into national cemeteries and narratives. The immense depth of the emotion triggered by the Vietnam War has led to an alternative narrative pushed in opposition to the official narrative of collective memory. This alternative narrative has yielded to a reimagining of the Vietnam War memorial and the reconstruction of its history. And it is a reimagining that recognizes the existence of different shades of memory.

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