
EXPLORATIONS

Remembering Vietnam

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The war in Vietnam ended for Americans nearly a decade ago, but the public memory of Vietnam is just beginning. This is a war that has become strangely disjointed from both personal and public life, even for those who were forever changed by it. Like other veterans, I think, my own vivid memories of the war and Vietnam sometimes feel curiously detached from me, almost as if they belong to someone else. I recently saw a film on veterans that used a good deal of television footage from the war years, and I thought how odd everything looked, how distant and unreal, the way old movies sometimes look, like relics or messages from a different time and culture. It is hard to believe that Americans were being killed in Vietnam eight years ago; that a little over ten years ago we invaded Cambodia, bombed Hanoi, mined Haiphong harbor; that a little over fifteen years ago the Congress of the United States voted by overwhelming majority to enact legislation punishing those who burned or destroyed their draft cards. Somehow, miraculously, we are different people now, and this is a different time.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial dedicated last November in Washington brings a part of Vietnam back to us. It is a somber, relentless reminder of what the war finally cost. Set in open ground at the end of Constitution Gardens, midway between Constitution Avenue and the Lincoln Memorial, it is, as both admirers and critics have pointed out, stunningly simple in design and effect. Within a wide and gentle excavation are two walls, roughly 250 feet in length, composed of slabs of polished black granite. At their vertex, the walls are ten feet high; from the vertex, they climb the slope of the excavation, diminishing to nothing at their extreme ends. Etched on the walls are the names of the 57,939 men and women who died, or remain missing, in Vietnam.

There is something unsettling in this simplicity, in part because it sets the new memorial so clearly apart from the world that surrounds it. The political center of Washington is colossal and monumental. Its landmarks and buildings radiate power and authority, the massive illusions of reverence and awe. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, by contrast, is purposely subdued, buried in the grounds that surround it, like a sunken crypt or tomb. There is nothing colossal or monumental here. While it is hard to really see the Lincoln Memorial, or the Capitol building, or any of the monuments of official Washington close up, the

Vietnam memorial has to be seen close up, has to be looked at in detail and touched. From a distance, one can see only crowds standing along a dark, half-hidden wall.

Yet the memorial is also unsettling because this very understatement captures perfectly the ambiguity and peculiar pain of the war it memorializes. Legitimate wars are easier to mythologize. They live clean in memory, just as their reasons appear clear to those who suffered their emotional and physical anguish. All war is frighteningly painful. Vietnam did not cause more pain or leave more wreckage of the sort all wars bring on. Its peculiar disaster was and is that its purposes were obscure and finally inadequate. It inspires no traditional sense of heroism or monuments to heroism because it lacked the collective conviction of necessity and shared sacrifice that makes such public sentiments possible. The cool abstraction of the new memorial evokes the confusion and even absence of purposes that clouded the Vietnam War from its outset.

There is an impressiveness of scale embodied in this new memorial, but it is not of the traditional kind. Weeks after its dedication, a part of the constant stream of visitors, I overheard a conversation between two children, both boys, about eight years old. At one point one of them asked the other, "How many people are buried here?" The second, gesturing in an expansive way, as if the number were too great to really grasp, answered, "A million, at least." And so it seems, name after name, month after deadly month in the chronological order of death or disappearance, more than 500 feet of names in letters less than an inch high, stacked on the dark granite slabs. Something meager and stupid like "how could it have been this many?" passed through my mind, surprise at the sheer size of the inscription—a testimony, perhaps, to the fact that it has been too easy to forget how murderous this war really was.

These names might belong to any war in American history were it not for the visitors that line the walls and the poignant fact that many of them are there to find names of friends or family who died in Vietnam. Among the knots of people gathered by noon, there is a constant ritual of pointing and touching, attempts to photograph a name or leave something near the stone that carries it, sometimes a flower, or a small flag, or a picture. Since the dead are listed chronologically, those looking for names sometimes have to refer to a printed alphabetical listing that notes the exact location of each inscription. I saw one couple approach a volunteer carrying the master list and ask for the location of a name. The volunteer opened the listing and scanned the pages, exactly the way one might scan a large metropolitan telephone book. When he finally stopped and repeated the name, the woman grabbed her husband's hand and turned to walk away, her face suddenly struck with dread and pain, as if she were hearing of this death for the first time, or as if its public inscription were the final assurance of its reality. In slightly different ways, I saw this scene repeated many times in the two afternoons I spent at the memorial. I could not help thinking that in this rit-

ual of search and recognition some kind of balance was being restored. Here, finally, the grief of loss might be declared openly and unambiguously, clear of the political tensions that dominated the war at home and sometimes forced its personal dimensions into the background.

For veterans themselves, the memorial no doubt has a wider symbolic meaning, as diverse and complex as their experience during the war and their experience since. For many, it is the kind of public recognition denied them upon their return, a traditional gesture that partially or wholly resolves the bitterness and confusion rooted in the war's unpopularity. This is the honor we were taught since childhood to understand military service in war would bring, and perhaps a little childishly expected it to bring, though in the memorial's moody design there remains, undeniably, something else: the suggestion that this conflict was anything but traditional, that the sacrifice and loss set here in public view is unique, a question for which there is no simple or satisfying answer. For still other veterans, I suspect, the memorial is and will be an important point in a long, slow process of coming to terms with painful memories and losses. I saw one man, wearing a First Infantry Division fatigue jacket, standing in front of a single stone for nearly an hour, talking quietly to himself and crying. Another I saw step up to the vertex of the two walls and leave a Bronze Star near the first stone. It is hard not to believe that in these and similar moments something buried and painful is being purged, that these public expressions of sorrow and solidarity might help close the book, or at least a chapter in the book, of hard, unresolved memory.

There is something timeless in these scenes of mourning for the dead, mourning that, I realized as I watched, would be recognized instantly across the world. This is the inescapable and universal legacy of war, the grief and memory of death. But what is so unique about the Vietnam War, at least for those who lived with it and must now remember it, is that there is a real struggle for memory going on, a struggle over what the public memory of Vietnam will in fact be. Two days before the official dedication of the memorial, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger delivered a Veterans Day address at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in which he clearly defined one set of terms in this struggle. For Weinberger, the memory of Vietnam will not be shaded by the conflict and doubt that surrounded the war from its very inception. It is instead a memory clothed in the traditional imagery of unambiguous heroic sacrifice. "Like the rows of white markers surrounding us at Arlington National Cemetery," Weinberger remarks in a description of the new memorial, "these lists of names will form a silent litany of America's heroes that will reverberate throughout the ages." This is the traditional image of war and remembrance, the belated acceptance of the veteran into the pantheon of American heroes. The Vietnam conflict was indeed different than previous wars, but for Weinberger that difference consists chiefly in our attitude toward the past. "A nation which forgets its heroes," he notes somberly, "risks its very existence." What we owe to Vietnam veterans is the same

sort of recognition and memory owed to the veterans of World War II, and for the same reasons. Stretching the classical imagery of heroism to its absurd limit, Weinberger even quotes from Shakespeare: "Upon such sacrifices, the Gods themselves throw incense."

This effort to equate our experience in Vietnam with past wars would not be so insidious if it were not linked to a more fundamental criticism and claim. For Weinberger, both the crisis of veterans and national memory point to a more significant and elemental crisis of political commitment. "The terrible lesson" to be drawn from Vietnam, a lesson "we must never forget," is that "we should never again ask our men and women to serve in a war we do not intend to win." The horrendous outcome of the Vietnam War was therefore not the result of military or political miscalculation, nor did it have anything essential to do with the complex history and reality of Vietnam. This "national trauma" was a failure of political nerve and will, the fatal consequence of self-doubt, hesitation, and political weakness. What Vietnam finally teaches us is not that the conception of the war and our understanding of Vietnam were hugely and fatally flawed, but that we lacked the moral strength and discipline to achieve a military conclusion. The mistake must not be repeated. Weinberger pushes the lesson of Vietnam to its extreme and disturbing conclusion. "Now it is our duty," he writes, "to see the freedom those heroes defended and the peace they sought were not pursued in vain. We must continue to rebuild the national defenses necessary to protect the peace and encourage all to join us in seeking genuine arms reductions."

These remarks indicate something about what is at stake in the memory of Vietnam. One wonders how those whose names are inscribed on the walls of the memorial might respond to the claim that the fundamental problem in Vietnam was a failure of will. For those who fought there know better than anyone just how frightfully inadequate and misleading all our preconceptions about this war and this country really were. There was no "victory" in Vietnam because there was nothing to win; no ground to take and occupy, no territory to liberate, nothing obvious to defend except, of course, one's life and the lives of friends. Worst of all, it was never even clear who "they" were and who "we" were, who was friend and who the enemy, for this was above all else a struggle among the Vietnamese in which Americans were finally the "others," the outsiders. In its own oddly expressive way, the military measures of success captured perfectly the uniqueness of this situation, the grim significance of "body counts" and the nearly metaphysical jargon about capturing the "hearts and minds" of Vietnam, scenarios in which the standard meanings of "victory" make little or no sense. The real problem with the Vietnam War was the reality of Vietnam, a reality that Weinberger, like Kennedy, like Johnson, like McNamara, prefers to push aside. Once again, it seems, American leaders and policy makers are finding it difficult to live in a world which is not coincidental with their ideology and will.

There are honest and corrupt forms of memory, memories that approach

the truth and others that disguise and pervert it. The disconcerting ambiguity inscribed in the new memorial is far closer to what happened in Vietnam and to those who fought there than Weinberger's bellicose revision. Nothing in that strange time in our history and the history since—the political turmoil and radicalism of the sixties, the particular anguish of veterans, the dark conclusion to the war in all of Southeast Asia—makes any sense at all if the essential error in the history of the Vietnam War rests on a failure of nerve. Standing in front of the memorial and staring at the seemingly endless list of names, it struck me over and over again that the real tragedy here was not just death but the fact that these mostly young men died without knowing what their deaths meant, without the certain conviction that their sacrifice mattered in terms of some larger and clearly evident purpose. That is why the memory of the war is choked with so much rage and bitterness, and why we want sometimes to simply forget it, or to exchange our anger for a simple hero's welcome. The "error" in our policy in Vietnam was surely not that we did not go far enough or hard enough, but that we started in the first place. "The lesson we must never forget" is that the war in Vietnam was an enormous political miscalculation and failure, rooted in a mindless and Manichean ideology of anticommunism, and fueled by an infatuation with technical prowess and physical power.

This is a hard memory to honor because it is so difficult to admit that these deaths have so little meaning. But the veterans of this war, both living and dead, are not served better by the revised history now being written by Weinberger and others. We do not do them justice by insisting that, after all, the war was well conceived but badly finished. The austere and spare presentation of the new memorial, so ambiguous and unresolved, is a far more honest image, disturbing as it is. This is a memory that, like the war itself, should continue to haunt us.