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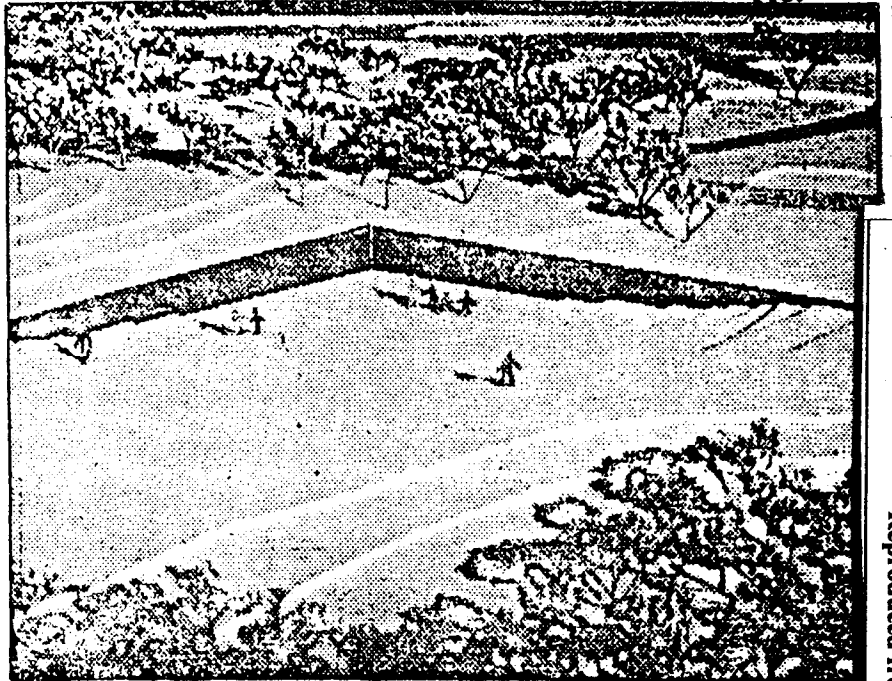
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The design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by Maya Ying Lin

REEXAMINING THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL PROJECT

Although the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) is operating under an impressive mandate from Congress, and claims some very prominent people among its sponsors--including both Mrs. Reagan and Mrs. Carter, former President and Mrs. Ford, Senator Goldwater, former Senator McGovern, Bob Hope, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff--there are strong indications that the results it will finally produce may be regrettable. VVMF has chosen a design (see above) which offends some of the veterans most enthusiastic about having a memorial, and some of the VVMF literature smacks heavily of the old antiwar movement and the far left.

Two of the originally most ardent Vietnam veteran supporters now see the project headed in the wrong direction and are trying desperately to have their views heard. One, author and ex-Marine James Webb, is himself listed on the VVMF letterhead as a sponsor. The other, twice-wounded West Point graduate Tom Carhart, arranged for the \$45,000 bank loan to finance VVMF's initial mailing campaign.

Both began having second thoughts about VVMF when they saw the selection made by a jury of architects and sculptors appointed to judge entries in the national design competition. In a detailed plea for reconsideration to the U.S. Fine Arts Commission, Carhart called it "a black gash of shame and sorrow." As an indication of how close his appraisal may have come to intent, in the Washington Post's May 16 article about the designer, it is spoken of as "a black rift in the earth."

the Post writer added: "This subtle symbolism seems to engrave the still ambiguous Vietnam trauma on the green tablet of American history."

Less poetically described, the design calls for two black granite walls, each over 200 feet long, joining to form an open "V." Installed in the ground on the northwest corner of Washington's Mall, one leg will point to the Lincoln Memorial, only some 600 feet away, and the other to the Washington Monument, beyond the eastern end of the Reflecting Pool. In the back, the top of the walls will be level with the ground. In front, the ground will slope down gradually to a depth of 10 feet where the walls meet. Inscribed on them will be the names of the over 57,000 men and women who died in the war or are unaccounted for--listed in the chronological order of their deaths. That was the design in toto. A controversy arose in various press accounts over the fact that neither Vietnam nor the war would be mentioned. From sifting the various responses to this by VVMF leaders it becomes clear that this was the original intent. Most recently, Project Director Robert Doubek wrote in a letter published in the October 16 National Review: "...the memorial will be appropriately identified as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial." There seems to be nothing published to indicate what VVMF would consider as appropriate identification. One thing is clear enough. Neither the American flag, which draped all of the coffins of the dead, nor mention of the military services whose uniforms they wore will be part of the memorial.

The offended veterans say the design will be just the opposite of the "grateful tribute" VVMF's fund-raising literature claims the memorial will pay to "all who served in that war." Both of the men mentioned earlier here have registered their feelings with the U.S. Fine Arts Commission, one of the federal agencies Congress empowered with final approval over the design of the memorial. On October 13, James Webb submitted a four-page, single-spaced statement to the Commission proposing that certain modifications be required--including raising it above ground --before it was given final approval. Central to his statement was the thought that although the veterans and the country as a whole seem to be well along in the process of assimilating the Vietnam experience, if this design is not modified, "it will reflect the incomplete assimilation process of the judges at one point in time, rather than making the definitive healing statement we had all so hoped for."

On the same day, Tom Carhart made a personal appearance before the Commission asking that its approval be denied until the selection process is reopened and a requirement established that Vietnam veterans sit on the jury making the selection. Not a single one sat on the jury that made the present choice. Some of the main

made in his thirty-minute presentation to the Commission are also made in column by him in the October 24 New York Times (page 7, here). The note below the end of the column indicates that the Commission rejected both men's pleas.

A study of all available VVMF literature left little doubt that these men have made valid assessments. Especially significant is Carhart's point about there being two wars involved, one being the military war in Vietnam, the other "a political war waged here at home." He contended that the design chosen by VVMF is a memorial to the political war at home and not the one the veterans fought in Vietnam.

Indeed, there are not only two wars visible in VVMF's literature, there are two sets of literature. One trades on the one war, and one trades on the other. One was used to provide ideas for the design competition. The other was, and is being, used to raise funds. Both sets of literature are illustrated here as pages 8-9 and 10-13 respectively. Pages 8-9 are from the brochure sent to participants in the design competition. This material is divisive, and repeatedly dwells on controversies that were the hallmark of the antiwar movement. Pages 10-13 comprise the fund-raising letter, devised to obtain Bob Hope's signature and thus to capitalize on his highly patriotic reputation with the public. It is conciliatory, and all but waves the flag VVMF's design will not include in the memorial.

Attention should be given to the full texts of both sets of material, but the excerpts below should demonstrate their separate philosophical approaches:

THE PURPOSE AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE MEMORIAL

American involvement in the Vietnam War ended over seven years ago, but the nation has not assimilated that painful experience. It was the longest war in our nation's history, and the most unpopular. Not since the Civil War has any nation so divided Americans. Although many of our present problems, such as inflation and lack of confidence in our institutions, have been attributed to the war, the average citizen has banished it from his consciousness. This attitude is understandable. Any discussions of Vietnam tend to recall the bitter and seemingly irresolvable debate over whether the U.S. should have become involved militarily in Southeast Asia and, subsequently, how the war was conducted. The debate remains unresolved is also understandable. Sixty million American men and women came of age during the more than ten years of the war. Those subject to military service were compelled to make choices which profoundly affected their attitudes towards themselves and their perception of their duties as citizens.

Dear Fellow American:

I'm writing you today not as an entertainer, but as a fellow American who has something very important to share ... I'm offering you the opportunity to take an active part in a project that is long overdue.

It has been more than eight years since America ended its involvement in the Vietnam war -- the longest, and certainly the most controversial, war in our nation's history.

None of us can forget that this war provoked bitter debate here at home -- dividing generations and families, and severing friendships.

The impact of that war has changed forever the lives of many Americans and, most of all, it has changed the lives of the more than 2 1/2 million Americans who served in it.



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The comparable sequence of basic ideas illustrated in these two passages continues throughout both papers. It is the language used, and the embellishment of the ideas, that gives one the flavor of the antiwar movement and the other that of traditional patriotism. Some examples of this have been underlined for purposes of illustration. Note that the war is unpopular in one paper but it is merely controversial in the other. Note the sentence about inflation etc. being attributed to the war, then the one about "unresolvable debate..." All of this is language of agitation not healing. And it is not in the Hope letter, yet the flow of ideas continues to be parallel. There is more, such as the passage near the bottom of page 8 on "bitterness, boredom, fear, exhaustion, and death." That is strong language, and it is politically loaded. There is still more on page 9.

The simple truth of the matter is that the entire letter prepared for Bob Hope's signature, and used to coax funds from the general public, omits words, phrases, and whole sentences having antiwar connotations that were retained or injected in the brochure sent out to guide the thinking of the participants in the design competition.

In fact, although the second paragraph on the right side of page 9 begins with the unqualified promise that "the memorial will make no political statement regarding the war or its conduct," it is itself in the midst of political expression on the war and its conduct, woven into the philosophical substance contestants had before them as they worked to produce designs which they hoped would cause the jury to award a \$20,000 prize.

Causing the general public to send in \$5 to \$500, or more, however, is another matter. The image of Bob Hope is used, and his letter is written to get Americans to open their pocketbooks and build this memorial lest "these veterans are left with the feeling that their sacrifice was in vain and that they are the forgotten victims of an unpopular war" (see underlining in the middle of the first page of Hope letter). All the while, the design contestants were fed ideas that could be expected to encourage design entries that would produce precisely that "sacrifice in vain...forgotten victims" message. And the fund appeal letter tells the public that the design chosen "embodies everything the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund was looking for" (see near the bottom of the third page of the Hope letter). But, even as late as the date of this paper, October 26, 1981, the fund appeal packet includes no drawing, and no description of the memorial. A visit to the VVMF office reveals stacks of folders with the drawing and description, but they do not accompany the fund appeals. There is only the Hope letter and a donation pledge card carrying

VVMF's promise to "build a suitable memorial to all who served in Vietnam." As with the memorial being appropriately identified, the public has no surety as to what might be considered suitable.

Again, the assessments of the offended veterans are valid. What is to be built will memorialize the antiwar movement not the war they fought in. This is true to an even greater degree than these men have said. For, the very site on which it is to be built is not one with significance in honoring America's war dead. That is usually Arlington Cemetery, across the Potomac. The site does have significance to the antiwar movement. The veterans would be inclined to miss the subtlety here, because their attention was on the war in Vietnam not the one at home. And even though it is tucked into the Bob Hope letter, most of the people in the general public would be similarly inclined to miss the full significance of this. They were not present in Washington during the large antiwar rallies. But the point is made at the top of the third page in the Hope letter, in words attributed to Senator Mathias:

"A location on the Mall is symbolically appropriate. We can all recall when the Mall was the battleground of opinion and dissent regarding America's role in Vietnam..."

The statement then trails off into remarks about the Lincoln Memorial and the divisions of the country during the Civil War. Whether the Senator is actually the author of this or not, the "battleground of opinion" phrase is precisely that "second war at home" the veterans found being memorialized at the expense of the war they fought in. Even so, the lines are an understatement in terms of the significance of the site to the antiwar movement. The Mall, and especially the west end of it, the Reflecting Pool and the Lincoln Memorial were literally taken over, time and time again, by the antiwar movement. Its participants camped there, they romped nude in the pool, they smoked "pot" there, and they littered the grounds and destroyed the benches there. The very thought of the site has to evoke antiwar images to them now, and to offer possibilities for a future in which anti-defense rallies can include ceremonies around a monument using the Vietnam dead to call forth visions of doom and hopelessness.

There is still another antiwar dimension to the VVMF affair of which the veterans and the general public are probably not aware. VVMF leaders have repeatedly insisted that none of the members of the jury making the design selection had been involved in the antiwar movement in any way. Preliminary research, however, indicates that four, maybe five, of the eight members of that jury were involved in some sort of protest against the war, and one of those has a record in the far left reaching

back to 1944. He has been reported to have been teaching at that time in the California Labor School, a noted front of the Communist Party USA. Subsequently, in June, 1957, he was identified as one of the members of a "professional cell of the Communist Party"³⁷--by a long-time party member who had defected and was making a sworn statement before Congress. Thus, he was understandably involved in several protests against the existence of Congressional committees looking into such matters. He worked on behalf of Smith Act defendants and the atomic spy Morton Sobel during the same period. And during the antiwar years his name was advertised in circulars on the Berkely campus as one who was available to help and support draft resisters. He was also involved in the Vietnam Moratorium.

In other words, by whatever mechanism, and through whoever's influence, the site chosen for the Vietnam memorial is that of the massive rallies against the war, the specifications for the design of the memorial were antiwar in nature, and the jury which made the selection of the winning design was weighted with men possessing antiwar sentiments, or actually involved in that movement--including one with long-standing connections with the Communist Party which, of course, had its hands in the antiwar movement whenever and wherever it could.

There is no question but what there are sincere and dedicated people within the leadership of VVMF who want an enduring and truly appropriate memorial to those who made the sacrifice in Vietnam. The project certainly has sponsors with impeccable credentials in those respects. A list of the sponsors in on page 14 here. The evidence is plentiful, however, that some of these people are not aware of the information discussed in these pages. The probability is that if they were, they would have second thoughts about the direction VVMF has taken just as some of the veterans so enthusiastic about the project in the beginning have had. In the meantime, however, agencies of the federal government are giving approval to a design that has not been openly shared with the donor public, and acquiescing to an inscription which seems not to have been articulated or accepted by anyone. The potential for an embarrassing outcome seems extremely high.

FMW