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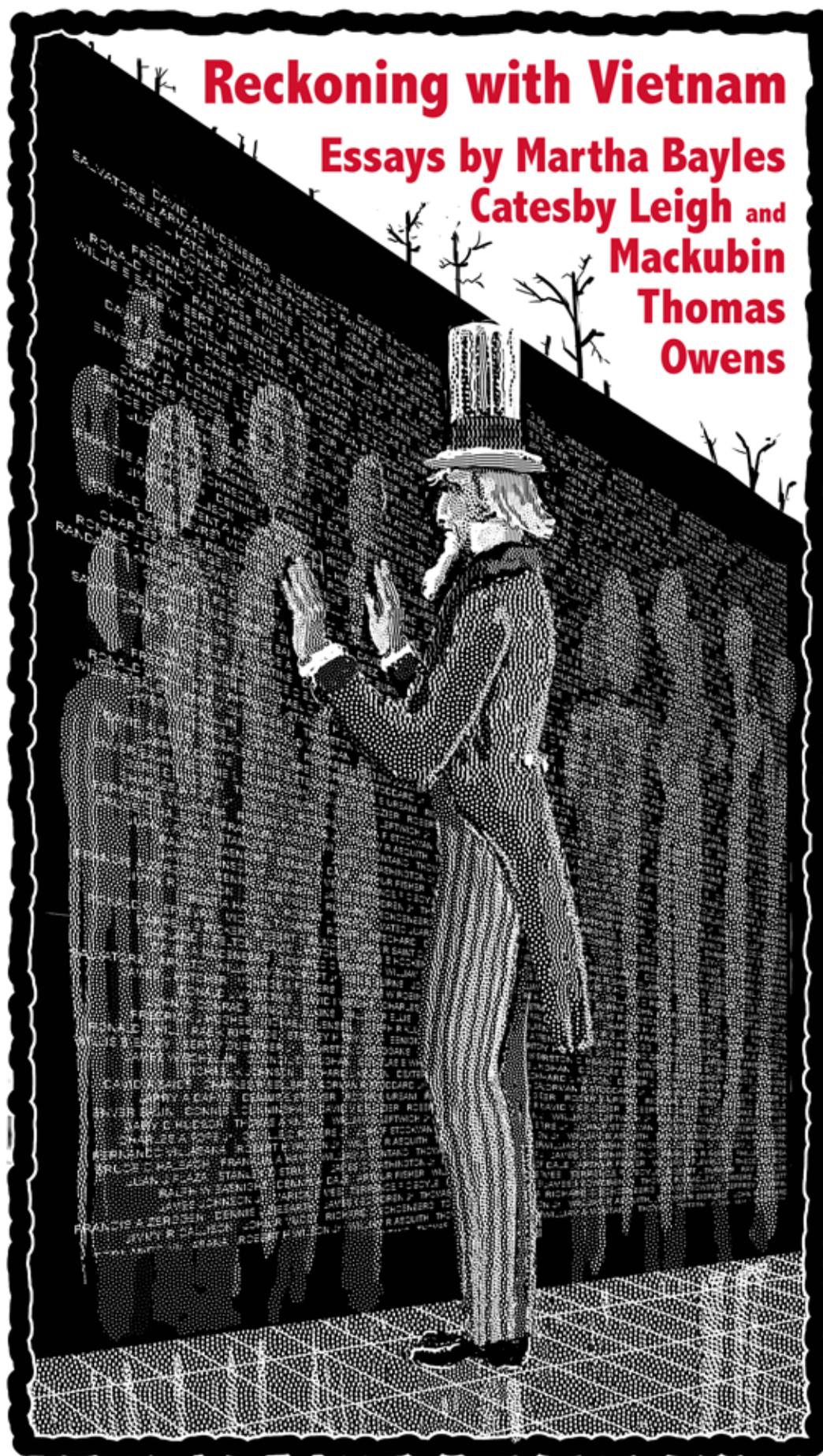
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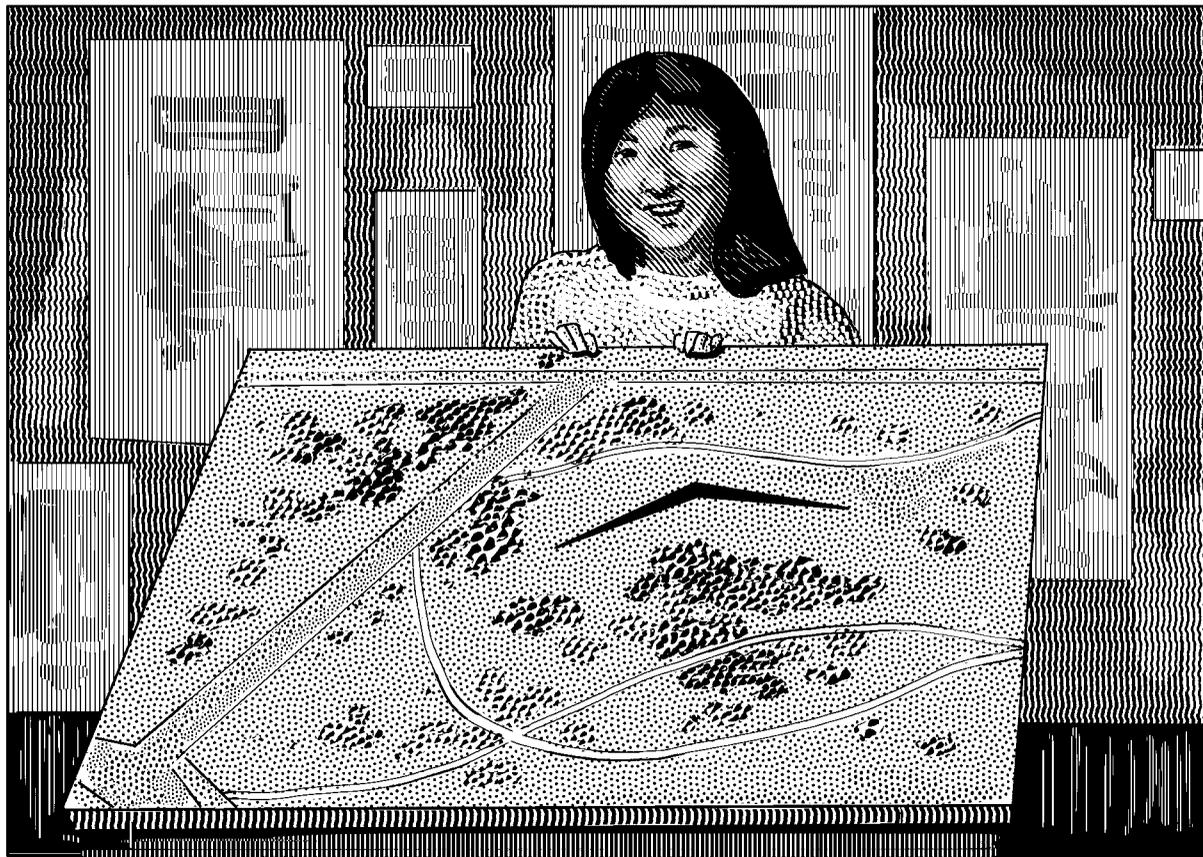
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THESE HONORED DEAD



Maya Lin showing her winning design, 1981; drawing from news photo

IN APRIL 1979, 30 OR SO VIETNAM VETERANS gathered at the Washington, D.C., office of the U.S. Conference of Mayors to talk about the problems some veterans were having adjusting to civilian life. The discussion revolved around the need for improved federal benefits and services, including psychological counseling. Out of the blue, an informally-attired vet with drooping shoulders, slouching posture, and a redneck accent stood up and proposed a memorial. The vet, Jan Scruggs, was a former Army rifleman who had been wounded in Vietnam. His suggestion was dismissed as irrelevant.

But not by everyone. A lawyer in attendance who had served in-country as an Air Force intelligence officer, Robert Doubek, approached Scruggs, told him he needed to launch a 501(c)(3) nonprofit to build the memorial, and gave him his card. Three and a half years later, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) which they co-founded would dedicate the nation's most significant postwar work of commemorative art, a chevron-shaped retaining wall clad in panels of highly reflective black granite. Situated on

the National Mall and designed by a Chinese-American architecture student, Maya Lin, the chevron's tapering arms point to the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, and are inscribed with the names of over 58,000 Americans who lost their lives in the nation's most divisive 20th-century war. Construction of the wall, which marked its 35th anniversary in November 2017, took place during President Reagan's first term, as did the addition two years later of sculptor Frederick Hart's *Three Servicemen* and a bronze flagpole decorated with the insignia of the armed forces.

Though some of the information he presents has appeared elsewhere, Doubek's "inside story," *Creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (2015), provides the best account of how the minimalist wall got built, painting a vivid picture of the challenges involved in getting a legislative mandate for a superb site in the Mall's Constitution Gardens, organizing a major design competition, confronting the bitter political and cultural conflict in which the memorial became embroiled, and raising more than \$8 million—mostly from individ-

ual donations—in a campaign to which Uncle Sam contributed not one dime. *A Rift in the Earth* (2017), by the prolific (and ardently anti-war) writer James Reston, Jr., provides an engaging, impressively researched narrative that usefully fills out Doubek's account in certain particulars. Neither book, however, can be said to offer much insight into the project's artistic and cultural ramifications.

The Troika

THE VVMF WAS RUN BY A TROIKA comprising Doubek and Scruggs, who was employed as a Labor Department bureaucrat at the time of the veterans' conclave, and John Wheeler, a lawyer at the Securities and Exchange Commission. The three came from contrasting backgrounds and had had different Vietnam experiences. Scruggs was raised in suburban Prince George's County, Maryland, the son of a milkman and a waitress. Born in 1950, he enlisted in the army straight out of high school so he could attend college on the G.I. Bill. During his tour of duty, he saw half his company killed or wounded.



Neither Doubek nor Wheeler, who were both six years older than Scruggs, saw combat. Tall and square-jawed, Doubek hailed from the Chicago area, where his parents owned a successful bakery business. He studied Russian and German at the University of Illinois before entering the Air Force, and subsequently earned a law degree at Georgetown. Wheeler came from a distinguished, blue-blooded military family. After graduating from West Point and before working in logistics and supply at the army's headquarters at Long Binh, he took an MBA at Harvard. He also had a Yale law degree as well as an impressive array of contacts.

None of the three was a hawk or a peacenik. They shared an abiding respect for the bravery American servicemen had demonstrated in Vietnam. Nor was the controversy surrounding the wall a simple matter of hawks who opposed it contending with doves who supported it. The VVMF managed to win the moral or monetary support of prominent hawks including General William Westmoreland, the former American military commander in Vietnam; Ellsworth Bunker, the former ambassador to Saigon; Henry Kissinger; and the conservative pundit James J. Kilpatrick, whose syndicated columns in support of the memorial brought the Fund over \$80,000.

Scruggs emerged from his undergraduate and graduate studies at American University as an authority on post-traumatic stress disorder. He was a hybrid: respectful of the martial virtues, but immersed in the therapeutic culture heralded by Philip Rieff in his landmark *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966). As the VVMF's president and the project's public face, Scruggs advocated the memorial as a means not only of promoting national reconciliation but also of healing psychologically wounded veterans whose traumatic experience of war had been aggravated after their return by the indifference or outright hostility of their fellow citizens. He also intended to include the names of America's Vietnam dead on the memorial, as he made clear in a *Washington Post* commentary written before the VVMF's foundation, in order "to remind an ungrateful nation of what it has done to its sons." Along with the names, however, he anticipated a soldier statue as a tribute to the service rendered by the nation's fighting men. Oddly enough, that's pretty much what he ended up with.

Wheeler had already been involved with the creation of a low-key, landscape-oriented Southeast Asia Memorial at West Point, which features a granite boulder decorated with a bronze plaque paying tribute to the members of the Classes of 1960 through 1969 who fell

in Vietnam. This memorial broke ranks with the heroic genre of statuary monuments, handled with increasing incompetence at the Point and elsewhere by the likes of Felix de Weldon and Donald De Lue. Wheeler was not only influenced by the therapeutic culture but was himself in serious need of healing. Whereas Scruggs proved to be a cocky, driven egomaniac, Wheeler was more seriously unhinged, his moods swinging from sympathetic and kindly to insufferably arrogant and temperamental. He was bipolar, and also wracked by guilt for having steered clear of combat in Vietnam, where 30 of his West Point classmates were killed in action.

Doubek, who was fired by his law firm soon after the VVMF's creation, was merely afflicted with social as well as professional insecurities. He resented the disdain for Vietnam veterans exhibited by his contemporaries in Washington's smart set, who had found ways to elude the draft. Doubek was directly in charge of building the memorial and he was

Books discussed in this essay:

Creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: The Inside Story, by Robert W. Doubek. McFarland, 324 pages, \$35

A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial, by James Reston, Jr. Arcade, 304 pages, \$24.99

the most even-keeled of the troika. He makes it clear that working with the other two could be extremely unpleasant. Still, the memorial would never have been built without them.

Minimalist Design

THE VVMF HAD ONE BIG ADVANTAGE from the outset: the idea of a Vietnam memorial enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress. Senator Charles Mathias, a liberal Maryland Republican who had opposed the war, encouraged the Fund to seek a site on the Mall rather than allow the memorial to be stashed across the Potomac River. The VVMF settled on Constitution Gardens's gently rolling landscape. The two-acre site mandated deference to the nearby monuments to Lincoln and Washington. Two decades before, a bizarre, neo-neolithic arrangement of concrete slabs, famously derided as "Instant Stonehenge," had been selected in a competition for a memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a park south of the

Mall. The federal Commission of Fine Arts rejected the scheme as too visually intrusive, and only years later did a completely different landscape-oriented design for the FDR memorial get built. A horizontal orientation for the Vietnam memorial was thus anticipated from the outset. It would be designed to inspire contemplation and would make no political statement on the war. And it would have to be relatively inexpensive because of its exclusively private funding.

Guided by a professional adviser, an architect named Paul Spreiregen, the VVMF opted for a competition juried by eight design professionals (including the editor of a landscape architecture publication)—all of them modernists. There were no laymen and no Vietnam veterans on the jury, though it did include two World War II vets and an Italian-born combat veteran of World War I—the latter being Pietro Belluschi, a former dean of MIT's architecture school and a member of the jury that had fallen for Instant Stonehenge. Several jurors had opposed the Vietnam war, and it later turned out that one of them had failed to disclose his active involvement in the anti-war movement. Even though the VVMF regarded inclusion of realist sculpture as a strong possibility, none of the jury's three sculptors was known for figurative work. At first glance, it was not a terribly promising group.

The memorial competition nevertheless attracted an unprecedented 1,421 entries, most of them submitted by students, recent graduates, or rank amateurs. The FDR competition, by contrast, had attracted 574 submissions, with a larger proportion of designs from established architects. "Most" of the Vietnam entries, Doubek acknowledges, "were junk." One entry that stood out from the postmodern smorgasbord of mediocrity (or worse) and wound up placing third consisted of a low, white, name-bearing granite wall forming two thirds of a vast circle, the main open portion facing east, with the wall configured as an inverted cove. Minor openings would frame points of entry and views of the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. Water would emerge from cuts in the wall to be channeled along its base. At each end of the wall sculptures faced one another—on one side a soldier holding up a wounded comrade and beckoning for help; on the other, a soldier rushing to their aid. Reston, a fervent admirer of Lin's wall who also is very respectful of Hart's "classical" oeuvre, helpfully includes a two-page color reproduction of this beautifully rendered submission by a team of landscape architects led by Joseph Brown. Frederick Hart designed those sculptures, too.



A jury including Vietnam veterans might well have opted for this design and relegated Lin's entry to the junk pile. Maya Lin was a senior at Yale, an architecture major who did not yet know how to draft. Her delineations of plan, elevation, and section were not drawn to the scale specified in the competition program. And as she demonstrated with her three reductive, almost diagrammatic pastel renderings of the wall, she did not know how to produce a perspective image a layman could read. Crucially, however, her submission included a compelling, jargon-free statement of how her memorial would be experienced.

The jurors were smitten. Her design was unambiguously contemporary, and they saw it as having no determinate meaning—a minimalist quality to which they were very receptive. But at the unveiling of her winning entry in an Andrews Air Force Base hangar on May 1, 1981, Scruggs and Doubek were baffled, with Scruggs, as he recounts in his memoir, seeing her chevron as “a big bat.” Wheeler, on the other hand, quickly gleaned a critical aspect of her design—that visitors would descend into rather than step up to her memorial. He broke the ceremony's uncomfortable silence by proclaiming her entry “a work of genius.”

Inspiration

WAS IT? IN THE ANNALS OF WESTERN art, “genius” has most often been ascribed to works exhibiting a high order of formal complexity as well as formal invention: the sculptures of Ictinus and Michelangelo, the paintings of Raphael and Caravaggio, the cathedrals and churches of the medieval master builders and Sir Christopher Wren. By this measure, we might by all means admire the Washington Monument—a simple, unornamented obelisk—but we wouldn't expect to hear it described as “a work of genius.” Lin's wall lacks formal complexity, and the level of artistic skill demonstrated in her competition submission was, well, minimal. Her design's aesthetic power—perceived not just by lefties and artsy types but by the likes of Kilpatrick and even the VVMF's key adversary, Secretary of the Interior James Watt, who would later pronounce the wall “very beautiful”—had an essentially conceptual basis typical of much modernist art. In short, Lin's wall could only be considered “a work of genius” within an eminently questionable modernist frame of reference. But it is an inspired work in its way, and one of the most important of all modernist creations if only because of the millions of people who have been moved by it.

The inspiration was not Lin's alone. And the way the wall is experienced as built is quite different from what she imagined in her competition submission. Lin was taking a studio course on funerary architecture when the Vietnam memorial competition was announced. The professor, architect Andrus Burr, assigned the memorial as a design project and Lin visited the Constitution Gardens site with three classmates late in 1980. There she conceived the wall as “a rift in the earth”—to quote her competition statement—“a long, polished black stone wall, emerging from and receding into the earth.” In an autobiographical overview of her oeuvre, *Boundaries* (2000), Lin says her initial concept “almost seemed too simple, too little,” and that she “toyed” with the addition of “some large flat slabs” in front of the wall to fill out her design. Her account conceals as much as it reveals. Reston reproduces a drawing by Burr depicting Lin's initial studio design: a long arc of tilted slabs descending the slope to her wall. In other words, Lin's initial design concept was a political gag—a post-modern send-up of the “domino theory” that

The wall engaged
veterans not as
citizens but
as atomized,
traumatized selves.

largely motivated America's Vietnam war policy. Reston pronounces the pun “a brilliantly devastating political commentary.”

During a studio critique involving Burr, two other architects, and her classmates, Lin was advised to scrap the slabs and concentrate on the chevron wall. She was also urged to exploit its vertex as the focus of her design. As a result, instead of the names of the dead extending, in the chronological order of their deaths, from one end of the chevron to the other, as Lin had intended, the names start at the top and just to the right of the vertex, extend to the end of the chevron's right wing, and then pick up again at the opposite end and terminate on the vertex's bottom, left-hand side. The years 1959 and 1975 are inscribed above and below the names' beginning and end, respectively.

Burr regarded Lin as a lackluster student on the whole and gave her a B+ for the course, provoking her enduring animosity. Later on, the visitor circulation pattern Lin anticipated in her competition entry proved unworkable—partly because of the huge number of

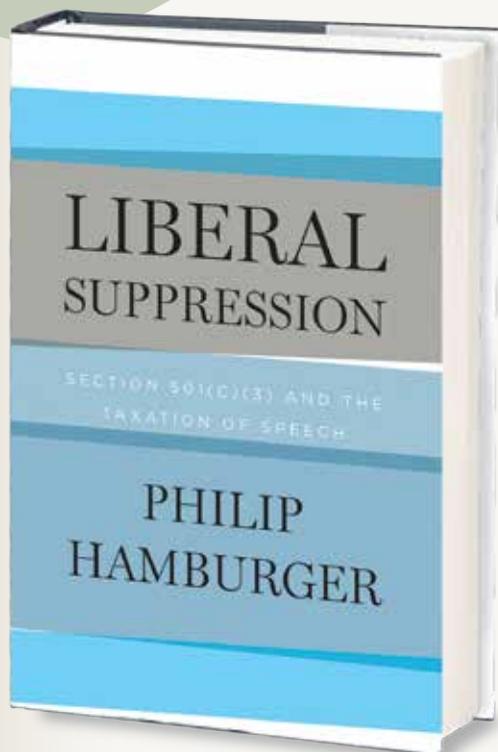
people the wall attracted—and this resulted in a major modification of her design. She had envisioned visitors descending to the memorial's vertex from the grassy slope in front. There the sheer quantity of names, receding into the distance in either direction, would impart “a sharp awareness of such a loss.” Apart from the obvious drainage issue her design presented, however, the sod on the slope could not withstand crowds. And the wall's main approach soon turned out to be the path from the Lincoln Memorial, which led to the chevron's western tip, not its vertex. Within a decade of the wall's dedication, the slope was cordoned off at its foot, so that the wall would thereafter be approached exclusively from each end.

Expansion of the narrow pavement initially laid over a gutter running in front of the chevron left not even a strip of grass between it and the pavement. These changes endowed the experience of the wall, especially for visitors not seeking out a particular name, with a processional formality that diverges very significantly from the grassy, naturalistic encounter Lin imagined. This formal quality enhances the memorial's dignity, as does its inflection to the great monuments nearby—a contextual gesture that is one of the principal strengths of Lin's design. The panorama narrows as one descends to the vertex, where the wall attains a height of ten feet, and where the magnitude of the war's toll resonates most deeply. It expands as one ascends alongside the other wing, with one of those monuments coming into focus. The deep vertex provides the vertical integration that resolves the memorial's emphatically horizontal orientation.

Opposition

WELL BEFORE THE DESIGN COMPETITION, Doubek had rejected a P.R. executive's suggested fundraising letter headline, “Their Turn on the Mall.” He saw it as politically confrontational and inconsistent with the reconciliation the VVMF wanted the memorial to promote. Of course, the idea behind the headline was that anti-war protesters had had their turn and now it was the veterans'. The Fund's problem was that an important coterie of early supporters saw the memorial project in precisely those terms, and this is what caused the ensuing imbroglio. These erstwhile supporters—foremost among whom were H. Ross Perot and the highly decorated Marine, respected author, and future U.S. senator James Webb, both of them Naval Academy graduates—were not only extremely unhappy with Lin's winning design but well positioned to impede its execution. Webb

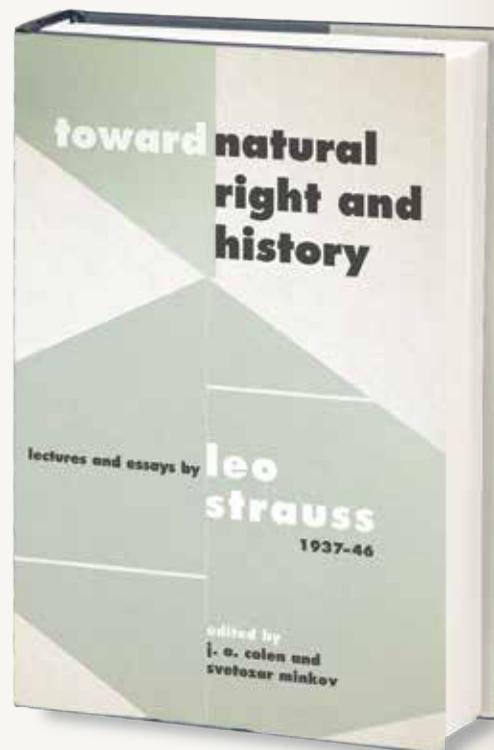
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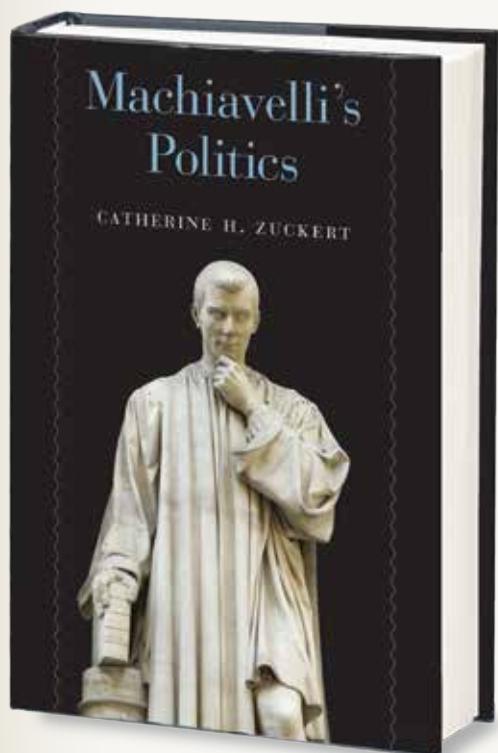
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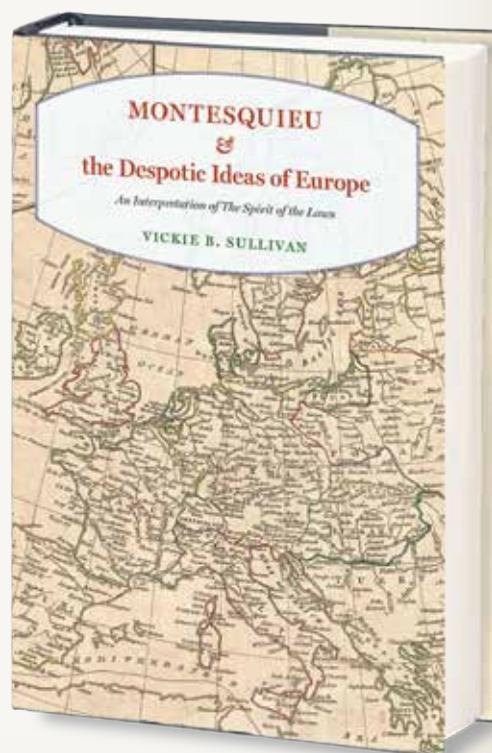


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(who thought up the “Their Turn on the Mall” slogan) emerges in Doubek’s book as the most thoughtful opponent—more thoughtful, in fact, than Doubek realizes—but consumed by a burning resentment of those prepared to accommodate Lin’s wall, starting with the VVMF leadership. Senator Warner, the Virginia Republican who proved to be the Fund’s indispensable congressional supporter, called Webb “a troubled man.”

The most outspoken and voluble of Lin’s detractors, however, was Tom Carhart, a West Point classmate of Wheeler’s who had earned two Purple Hearts in Vietnam, where he had served as an infantry platoon leader. Carhart had provided crucial volunteer assistance to the VVMF early on, facilitating a \$30,000 bank loan for the mass-mailing of a fundraising appeal. His virulent denunciation of Lin’s design at a Commission of Fine Arts hearing in October 1981—“black instead of white, hidden in the ground instead of raised above it...a black gash of shame and sorrow”—set the tone for much invective in the following months. In private, Carhart slurred Lin as a “gook,” and he had plenty of company, according to Doubek. No doubt Lin’s race, sex, youth, and Ivy League pedigree deepened many veterans’ suspicions about her design. Press interviews she gave after her competition victory certainly didn’t improve matters, as she evinced little or no interest in honoring the veterans’ service. “I wanted to describe a journey—a journey which would make you experience death,” she told the *Los Angeles Times* at the press conference introducing her winning design. Months later, she regaled a *Washington Post* reporter with solipsistic revelations:

I don’t read the papers. I just ignore the world. It’s like everything is up in my head with no real, concrete experiential reality. It’s all what I feel.

And regarding her fascination with death and cemeteries: “Everyone knows I’m morbid.”

She knew nothing about the Vietnam war, never asked questions about veterans’ wartime experiences or military life in general, and acted as if the Fund existed simply to implement her design in all its sublime purity, without modification. She resisted essential changes: the addition of commemorative inscriptions alongside the years on each side of the wall’s vertex, paved pathways at the memorial site, and most of all (and most understandably), Hart’s sculpture.

Needless to say, Lin’s relations with the VVMF were chilly, though the Fund did hire the architects she wanted, the Cooper-Lecky

Partnership, a Washington firm which took her on as a \$15-an-hour consultant on the memorial project. She displayed considerable poise under pressure, keeping her cool during a 15-minute exchange with Perot, who had contributed \$160,000 for the memorial competition, when he inspected a model of the wall in the basement of the Cooper-Lecky office. And she had definitely upped her high-profile interview game by the time she appeared in a *60 Minutes* segment at the height of the memorial controversy. Morley Safer: “How Chinese are you?” Lin: “As apple pie.”

Lin’s witty reply is the more notable because it was said her design was “Taoist” or at least imbued with an East Asian vibe. But it is the work of American minimalist sculptors like Michael Heizer and Richard Serra that relates most directly to her wall. Serra’s minimalist, site-specific black steel installation in St. Louis, *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevation* (1971), strikingly resembles a wing of Lin’s chevron “emerging from and receding into the earth.”

Compromise

BY EARLY 1982, IT WAS CLEAR TO SENATOR Warner that the VVMF needed to reach a compromise with its antagonists. While Perot, Webb, and company had limited backing in Congress, the White House did not want to offend their supporters. Nor did it wish to anger the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, which wanted Lin’s competition-winning design executed on schedule. (The Legion alone contributed over \$1 million to the VVMF campaign.) During two tense meetings between the VVMF and its adversaries at which Warner presided, the deal committing the Fund to inclusion of the sculpture and flagpole was struck. But Interior Secretary Watt, the antagonists’ principal Reagan Administration ally, intended to withhold the building permit for the memorial until he was certain the compromise would be implemented to their satisfaction. In March, with completion of the wall in time for a four-day “National Salute to Vietnam Veterans” in November at risk, the White House ordered him to issue the permit.

Although the two sides soon settled on Frederick Hart as the sculptor, the VVMF never agreed to the Perot-Webb faction’s insistence that his statue be placed in front of the wall, facing away from it so that the wall would serve as a backdrop, with the flagpole perched above its vertex. Hart himself did not support that arrangement, which would have ruined Lin’s design without producing

a good memorial. The placement issue still wasn’t settled when the dedication of the wall drew an emotional crowd exceeding 150,000 people. The public’s response to the memorial was overwhelmingly positive. The line about Lin having designed a “tribute to Jane Fonda,” which was employed by Phyllis Schlafly and Tom Wolfe but originated with Carhart, quickly lost traction. So did the placement of the sculpture and flagpole advocated by the Fund’s opponents. Though Watt pronounced himself ready to delay a decision on the matter for a year or more—emphasizing that it was a matter of politics, not aesthetics—the White House again ordered him to stand down. Shortly afterward, the Commission of Fine Arts directed that the sculpture and the flagpole be placed in a leafy entry area between the Lincoln Memorial and the wall. They were dedicated in November 1984, at a ceremony attended by President and Mrs. Reagan which itself attracted some 150,000 people.

Hart’s three bronze soldiers gaze warily at the wall from across the Vietnam memorial landscape, as if taking stock of the terrible concatenation of names. The sculpture was designed to complement the wall, not upstage it. Stylistically, it belongs to a highly realistic sculptural vernacular that has appeared in countless memorials in recent decades. It is one of the best examples of this vernacular—the figures’ tacky polychromatic patination notwithstanding—but falls well short of a classical grasp of form. Moreover, latter-day identity politics made short shrift of any idea that the three soldiers could stand for all Americans in uniform who served in-country. Within a decade of the unveiling of Hart’s sculpture, a Vietnam Women’s Memorial consisting of a bronze sculpture of three nurses and a wounded soldier appeared within the memorial precinct. The number of women whose names are inscribed on the memorial wall is eight.

An Anti-Monument

STEVEN SILVER, A VETERANS ADMINISTRATION expert on post-traumatic stress disorder who flew hundreds of missions as a Marine pilot during the war, testified before the Commission of Fine Arts early in 1983 on his experience with bringing groups of veterans to the wall for therapeutic purposes. “The memorial serves magnificently in eliciting much which was buried within them,” he said. The purpose of his testimony was to oppose the location of the sculpture and the flagpole the VVMF’s opponents sought. The wall in itself, Silver asserted,



is sufficient—these carved names permit no denial, no hiding. To make that structure more specific would begin to weaken its power. As is understood by both Western psychology and Eastern Zen, the greater the effort to portray a specific reality, the less real the portrayal becomes because of what is forced to be excluded.

The problem with this line of argument is that in commemorative art, “less” is far more likely to turn out really to be less than “more.” Is the Lincoln Memorial’s architecture and sculpture really “less real” because of its formal specificity? Do you have to be a Bonapartist to be moved by the Arc de Triomphe and its sculptural decoration?

Perhaps most importantly the wall engaged Silver’s veterans not as citizens—not as members of a political community whose survival depends on adherence to abiding ideals of patriotism and courage on the part of those to whom its defense is entrusted—but as atomized, traumatized selves. In an interview with a *Washington Post* reporter after the wall’s completion, Jim Webb lamented the lack of “historical context in [the VVMF’s] thinking, historical or metaphysical.” His admittedly vague remark, which mystifies Doubek, would seem to refer to the fact that historically, war memorials have had the metaphysical role of affirming or even embodying patriotism and courage. What Webb and his cohorts wanted was a Vietnam memorial in the monumental tradition. What they got, even taking the *Three Servicemen* into account, was an anti-monument. They wanted a monument that

portrayed Vietnam veterans’ service as being in line with the service rendered by the nation’s fighting men throughout our history. What they got asserts in no uncertain terms that the Vietnam conflict stands apart from other wars.

“It is a formalized mass grave,” an underwhelmed David Douglas Duncan, the veteran *Life* photographer, declared during a visit to the wall, partially echoing Webb’s vitriolic characterization of it at a press conference as “this sad, dreary mass tomb nihilistically commemorating death.” (Webb obviously had read Lin’s press interviews.) Over time, visitors have in fact left hundreds of thousands of tokens of love and remembrance—poems, flowers, G.I. boots, teddy bears, bottles of whisky—as if the dead were somehow there to receive them. Anecdotal accounts suggest that loved ones of the fallen, encountering not only their names but their own reflected selves in the granite, sometimes imagine the dead in animate form on the other side of the wall.

At the end of the day, the Vietnam memorial succeeded in being more than a therapeutic memorial, resonating with people with divergent perspectives on the war. Nevertheless, the wall and the vast amount of media coverage it has generated appear to have played a significant role in mainstreaming the therapeutic culture, with its literally self-centered notions of psychological or spiritual “healing” as the highest good. It is also important to bear in mind that the Vietnam memorial, as a whole, is an inorganic, adventitious, spatially dispersed hybrid including figurative sculptures and the flagpole along with the wall. By contrast, architectural and sculptural elements were organically wedded in the Brown-

Hart competition entry that placed third. Had it been chosen, the identity politics that led to the women’s memorial might never have come into play.

Over the last three decades, Maya Lin has worked mainly as an environmental artist and architect. But one of her most important artistic roles since winning the Vietnam memorial competition has been serving, in 2003, as an influential juror in the competition for a 9/11 memorial in lower Manhattan. She supported the unambiguously minimalist and literally abysmal winning design by Michael Arad, a young architect with New York’s public housing authority. The central problem, however, wasn’t Lin’s influence; it was that the therapeutic culture defined the parameters for the memorial and accompanying museum, thereby disqualifying any symbolic assertion of national dignity or resolve. What resulted, at a staggering cost of \$700 million, was the biggest single disaster in the annals of American civic art.

Although the Mall is enhanced by Lin’s wall, the nation might have been better served by a Vietnam memorial that, while eschewing any intimation of triumph, engaged with the monumental tradition, as the Brown-Hart competition design did. There is reason to suspect the Vietnam memorial wall is a minimalist one-off—a uniquely successful artifact of its kind—and still more reason to wonder whether the therapeutic culture will ever generate an aesthetically resonant commemorative idiom of its own.

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