

The Controversies around the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.

"The national Vietnam Veterans Memorial may well have generated more controversy than any work of architecture in recent history."¹

...a few things to keep in mind

Besides being deeply controversial, morally questionable and highly unpopular, the Vietnam War was a war that had been lost. Many Vietnam Veterans who returned to the US were not welcomed and celebrated as heroes – instead they were confronted with resentment and rejection or completely ignored by a society that already wanted to forget the war before it was even over.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial

In March 1979 Vietnam veteran Jan Scruggs had the idea of building a memorial for all the Vietnam veterans to help them reclaim a modicum of recognition and social standing. One month later he initiated the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF).

The Design: the difficult task of how to create a memorial that celebrates the virtues of the individual veteran without reference to his cause

In October 1980 a national design competition was announced by the VVMF. The jury and the contestants were given only a few simple instructions: the design should (1) be reflective and contemplative in character; (2) harmonize with its surroundings; (3) contain the names of those who had died in the conflict or who were still missing and (4) make no political statement about the war.²

The Winning Design: "The Wall"

On May 1st 1981, the jury presented the winning design. They unanimously picked the proposal that had impressed them with its simplicity. It turned out to be by Maya Ying Lin, a 22-year-old architecture student at Yale University. Her design consists of panels of black, highly reflective granite that shape a large "V" at a 125-degree angle. The panels have been built into the earth's surface so that the visitor walks downhill toward the apex. The power of the design lies in the overwhelming presence of individual names which are inscribed in the wall in chronological order of their death, showing the war as a series of individual human sacrifices.



The Controversies: a reflection of the impossibility of finding a single design that can represent the Vietnam War for all Americans

(1) The Designer Controversy: Maya Ying Lin

Many people were offended that a Chinese American student was the architect of a major American memorial of a war fought in Indochina.

(2) The Design Controversy: "A Black Gash of Shame"³

Many people protested that Lin's design was too abstract, that it looked like a big "black scar" and that it was too different from other war memorials. It was not considered celebratory and heroic, but nonpatriotic and feminine. Therefore many critics demanded additions to Lin's design which should include a more heroic, life-like depiction of a soldier and a flag. A compromise was reached in agreement that a statue and a flag will be added to the Lin design. On November 13th, 1982 the official dedication ceremony of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial took place.

¹ Nicholas J. Capasso, "Vietnam Veterans Memorial." In *The Critical Edge: Controversy In Recent American Architecture* edited by Tod Marder (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 188-202.

² Cf. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, "Design," Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. <http://www.vvmf.org/Design> (accessed September 2, 2011).

³ Tom, Carhart, "Insulting Vietnam Vets," *New York Times*, October 24, 1981.

1983 Addition of the flagpole

The flag was added as a symbol of patriotism. At the base of the flagpole are the seals of the five branches of military service, with the following inscription: *"This flag represents the service rendered to our country by the veterans of the Vietnam War. The flag affirms the principles of freedom for which they fought and their pride in having served under difficult circumstances."*⁴

1984 Addition of the *The Three Servicemen* statue by Frederick Hart

The Three Servicemen statue was added to draw a more heroic picture of the soldiers. Interpretations of this work vary widely. Some say the three strong, soldiers have the "thousand yard stare" of combat soldiers. Others say the troops are on patrol and begin looking for their own names as they come upon the Memorial.



(3) The Gender Controversy: the representation of female veterans

Former Army nurse and Vietnam veteran Diane Carlson Evans initiated the addition of the Vietnam Women's Memorial to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to honor the thousands of women who volunteered to serve in Vietnam.

1993 Addition of the *Vietnam Women's Memorial* statue by Glenna Goodacre

The statue was added to pay tribute to the female veterans and it is the first national memorial that honors the women's patriotic service. It shows four figures: an injured male soldier, a white nurse, an African American women comforting the nurse and looking to the sky and a third woman kneeling, holding an empty helmet.



(4) The Name Controversy: how to honor veterans who died after their return to the US due to their service

Many Vietnam Veterans demanded that their comrades who suffered a premature death (Agent Orange induced illnesses, post- traumatic stress disorder,...) directly related to their service in Vietnam should also be remembered.

2004 Addition of the "In Memory Plaque"

Added to honor those Vietnam veterans whose names are not eligible for placement on the Memorial. Inscription: *"In memory of the men and women who served in the Vietnam War and later died as a result of their service. We honor and remember their sacrifice."*⁵

Discussion Questions

- 1) Despite the numerous controversies, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial belongs to the most popular memorials in the US. From the very beginning people visiting the memorial left behind all kind of gifts (medals, photos, letters,...). Why do you think the memorial evokes such a response? What makes it so special?
- 2) Do you think that the controversies around the Vietnam Veterans Memorial had an impact on the design and understanding of future memorials?

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⁴ Cf. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, "The Three Servicemen Statue," Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. <http://www.vvmf.org/ThreeServicemen> (accessed September 2, 2011).

⁵ Cf. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, "In Memory Plaque," Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. <http://www.vvmf.org/InMemoryPlaque> (accessed September 2, 2011).