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The Experience of the VVM

Charles L. Griswold



Ideology in American
Literary History

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An Exchange

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An Interview with Paul de Man

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On the cover: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Detail of photograph by Stephen S. Griswold.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography

Charles L. Griswold

Photographs by Stephen S. Griswold

My reflections on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) were provoked some time ago in a quite natural way, by a visit to the Memorial itself. I happened upon it almost by accident, a fact that is due at least in part to the design of the Memorial itself (see fig. 1). I found myself reduced to awed silence, and I resolved to attend the dedication ceremony on November 13, 1982. It was an extraordinary event, without question the most moving public ceremony I have ever attended. But my own experience of the Memorial on that and other occasions is far from unique. It is almost commonplace among the many visitors to the VVM—now the most visited of all the memorials in Washington—a fact so striking as to have compelled journalists, art historians, and architects to write countless articles about the monument. And although philosophers traditionally have had little to say about architecture in general or about that of memorials in particular, there is much in the VVM and its iconography worthy of philosophical reflection. Self-knowledge includes, I hazard to

A draft of this paper was presented on 27 March 1984 at the Iowa State University. A two-page article containing a few of the remarks made here about the VVM was published by Public Research Syndicated on 11 May 1983. I would like to thank Professors Gina Crandell, Robert Ginsberg, William MacDonald, Joel Snyder, and David Thompson for their helpful criticisms of the paper. I also acknowledge with gratitude the encouragement and help I received in composing this piece from my colleague Dale Sinos and from Francis V. O'Connor; their invaluable suggestions have contributed to every page of this essay. My final words of thanks must go to Lisa Griswold, who so patiently accompanied me on innumerable visits to Washington's memorials, and to Stephen Griswold, whose photographs illustrate this essay.

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FIG. 1.

say, knowledge of ourselves as members of the larger social and political context, and so includes knowledge of that context.

Architecture need not memorialize or symbolize anything; or it may symbolize, but not in a memorializing way, let alone in a way that is tied to a *nation's* history. The structures on the Washington Mall belong to a particular species of recollective architecture, a species whose symbolic and normative content is prominent. After all, war memorials by their very nature recall struggles to the death over values. Still further, the architecture by which a people memorializes itself is a species of pedagogy. It therefore seeks to instruct posterity about the past and, in so doing, necessarily reaches a decision about what is worth recovering. It would thus be a mistake to try to view such memorials merely "aesthetically," in abstraction from all judgments about the noble and the base. To reflect

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philosophically on specific monuments, as I propose to do here, necessarily requires something more than a simply technical discussion of the theory of architecture or of the history of a given species of architecture. We must also understand the monument's symbolism, social context, and the effects its architecture works on those who participate in it. That is, we must understand the political iconography which shapes and is shaped by the public structure in question. To do less than this—if I may state a complex argument in hopelessly few words—is to fall short of the demands of true objectivity, of an understanding of the whole which the object is. To understand the meaning of the VVM requires that we understand, among other things, what the memorial means to those who visit it. This is why my observations about the dedication of the VVM and about the Memorial's continuing power over people play an important role in this essay.

The VVM has been extremely controversial, though no more so than many other monuments in the same area (the Washington Monument being a case in point).¹ In spite of the controversy, no major memorial on the Washington Mall has been built in so short a time from the moment fund-raising began to the moment the last stone was in place—about three-and-a-half years for the VVM. I have no intention of arguing here for or against the war the VVM memorializes. But it is not possible to discuss the Memorial satisfactorily without understanding why it has stirred such discussion. The heart of the debate concerns the question of whether war memorials should take a stand for or against the cause over which the given war was waged—that is, it concerns the extent to which memorials should unite war and politics. None of the structures on the Mall can claim to unite war and politics as the Alamo and Gettysburg do, for no blood was actually spilt here in pitiless battle. The Mall's land is not sanctified in that sense, nor indeed in the sense definitive of the monumental Arlington National Cemetery, which is connected to the Mall by the Arlington Memorial Bridge. No one is buried on the Mall itself.² The Mall's memorials connect (and occasionally separate) war and politics on a purely symbolic level and in a fascinating variety of ways. The VVM's stand on this issue is, as we shall see, singular and subtle.

I think it fruitful to approach the VVM in a somewhat roundabout way. I shall begin in section one with some general remarks about the Mall, of which the VVM is a part, and then in section two I will discuss several monuments in the immediate vicinity of the VVM. Two reasons recommend this approach. First, the geometry of the VVM clearly connects that memorial with two of the monuments on the Mall, those dedicated to Lincoln and Washington. Its presence in the Mall's Constitution Gardens in itself warns us against considering it in complete isolation from its context. Second, in order to understand just how radically different this memorial is, it is helpful to consider exactly what it is *not*, and this is effectively accomplished by contrasting it with the other memorials near

it. With this preparation, I turn in section three to a consideration of the VVM itself, the heart of my reflections.

I

If we take the White House, Capitol, and the monuments to Lincoln and Jefferson as our reference points, the area thus defined is quadrilateral in shape or, more precisely, trapezoidal. At the west end of the area sits the Lincoln Memorial, and opposite it at the east end the Capitol. Bisecting the area vertically, we have the White House to the north and the Jefferson Memorial to the south. For the sake of convenience I shall extend the usual nomenclature and shall refer to this whole area as the "Mall." For all practical purposes, the center of the Mall is marked by the towering Washington Monument. The other four structures, marking the far reaches of the trapezoid both laterally and vertically, are like planets in orbit around this obelisk. All of this gives the Mall a formal unity. But the area derives its substantive unity not so much from its geometrical properties as from its purpose, memorializing. The Mall is *the* place where the nation conserves its past in this particular way, simultaneously recollecting it (albeit rather selectively), honoring it, and practicing it (in the White House and Capitol). The presence of the many museums along the Mall emphasizes this fact; they adorn this monumental precinct with America's scientific and artistic heritage. The arts and sciences thus come into close proximity with the seat of government, as if to self-consciously proclaim their mutual influence. We are to infer that the history of American power is that of a cultured and progressive people.

On the Mall, then, matter is put to rhetorical use. It is made to educate and edify the citizens of the present as well as form those of the future by persuading them to live out the virtues of the past. It is memory in stone, earth, and water, a patrimony articulated by measured expanses and the interplay of symmetrically arranged symbols. The word "monument" derives from the Latin *monere*, which means not just "to remind" but also "to admonish," "warn," "advise," "instruct." It follows that the Mall says a great deal, in what it portrays and in what it omits to portray, about how Americans wish to think of themselves. In still another formulation: the Mall is a sort of political mandala expressing our communal aspirations toward wholeness.

The Mall in its present shape is a fairly recent creation.³ The ability of a group to think of itself as a nation depends on a consensus existing among its citizens about what it means to be a unified whole. This consensus emerged only gradually in American history. The debate about how the united states ought to be united is coeval, of course, with the American Founding. The meaning of *E Pluribus Unum* (a phrase engraved on the spherical pedestal supporting the statue *Freedom* that caps the dome of

the Capitol) has been hotly contested in the history of American political thought. The existence and character of the Mall demonstrate that the Federalists have very much won the battle. The fact that the Mall grew, so to speak, over a long stretch of time is not inconsistent with the following crucial point: Regardless of the intentions of the designers of the Mall and its monuments at various historical moments, the area possesses an extraordinary cohesiveness from the standpoint of its symbolism. It is as though an invisible hand has guided the many changes effected on the Mall, a communal logic imperceptible as a whole at any given time. The intricate ecology of symbolism that articulates the Mall's "substantive unity," as I called it above, is not contradicted by the fact that no one consciously designed the Mall with the totality of that symbolism in mind. The Mall provides us with a striking example of a whole that is, in good measure, self-organizing.⁴

Of course the city of Washington did not grow without *any* unified design. The land for the original ten-mile-square district, which George Washington did much to select, was authorized by Congress in 1790; the basic outlines of the city were set out in 1791 by Pierre-Charles L'Enfant, whom Washington chose for this task. The federal government moved to Washington from Philadelphia in 1800. The city has a rather Parisian scale to it or, more accurately, it possesses a distinctly Roman, and thus imperial, sense. The broad avenues up which the country's newly elected leader now travels like an emperor returning from a victorious war, the centrality of the obelisk (recall the many obelisks in Rome), the pervasiveness of the symbol of the eagle (even if it represents, in our case, a particular species of American eagle), the fasces on the front of the Lincoln Memorial (as well as on Lincoln's chair in the Memorial), a separate and palatial dwelling for the chief executive, as well as the physical separation of the Capitol into Senators' and Congressmen's wings (the "Senate" being of Roman origin)—all of these are reminders of Rome. Even the term "Capitol" derives from the Latin word (*Capitolium*) that referred to the temple of Jupiter in ancient Rome. Indeed, the domes of the Capitol, the Jefferson Memorial, the National Gallery of Art and National Museum of Natural History (both located in the Mall's Constitution Avenue), as well as the prominent rotunda in each, derive from the Pantheon.⁵ And instead of the Colosseum down the street from the seat of government, Washington has its similarly placed Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium.

In L'Enfant's design, the Capitol is close to the geographic center of the District of Columbia. The main avenues of the city meet at the Capitol, like spokes of a wheel at the hub. The Capitol, as the home of Congress, embodies the basic tenet of democracy, that the people ought to govern themselves. Thus the symbolic center of the district, and so of the nation, is the rule of the people. The foundation for this view is, in the tradition at the heart of American political theory, the doctrine of individual rights, that is, freedoms; and from this derives the doctrine

that rule over the people is legitimized only by the voluntary consent of individuals. Correspondingly, the dome of the Capitol is capped by the huge statue (erected in 1863 during the Civil War) symbolizing freedom.⁶ It is worth noting that this statue, as well as the Capitol, faces to the east. Traditionally, most great temples have faced the east, toward the rising sun, the source of dawn, light, renewal, hope, resurrection. In this way the sun illuminated the statue of the god within pagan temples. The Lincoln Memorial too faces east; as in the case of the Capitol, the directionality suggests hope for the "unity from out of many" that is life (as opposed to the dissolution that is death). I shall have more to say below about the directionality of the various memorials on the Mall.

But the center of the district, in another sense, is not the Capitol but the monument erected for the country's "father" and the district's eponym. The Washington Monument, as the center of the Mall, is in its own way also the symbolic center of Washington's city and so of the nation he did so much to found. It is not fanciful to detect, then, a certain tension between the center of the Mall and one of the "planets" at the east end of the trapezoid, a planet that nevertheless competes with its sun for the title of "center of the city." There is a tension, that is, between the founder and the system he founded, the rule of one man and the rule of the people, the president and the Congress. Certainly the Washington Monument—an obelisk much taller than the obelisks of antiquity—is the visual center of the city; it can be seen from virtually every vantage point, particularly since local regulations severely limit the height of structures in the city. Since one can ascend to its peak, the Washington Monument is also a sort of observation tower from which everything in the city can be seen. In both of these ways the Monument is the center of things. Nevertheless, the Capitol usually serves as the city's signature, as it were; it is the localizing logo on everything from city billboards to commercial enterprises to local news programs. But the tension between these symbols is lessened by several peculiarities of the Washington Monument itself which I would now like to discuss in detail. The importance of the Washington Monument for my purposes is intensified by the fact that it is one of the two monuments to which the VVM points (see fig. 2). In keeping with my roundabout approach to the VVM, however, I shall also comment in the next section on several other relevant monuments and memorials.

2

The selection of the design for the Washington Memorial was hotly debated for quite some time. After all, just how should the nation's first commander-in-chief and president—in a real sense, its Founder—be remembered? The answer amounts to a philosophical position on the matter.



FIG. 2.

Take, for example, the famous nonequestrian statue of Washington, now exiled to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History—Horatio Greenough's 1840 rendition in the style of Antonio Canova's 1822 statue which was destroyed in a fire—in which Washington is portrayed bare-chested in a toga and sandals. This statue is an almost embarrassing allusion to Zeus, as well as to Washington's apotheosis after the manner of Roman emperors.⁷ In any event, the original design of the Washington Monument called for a fantastically ornate base, and the 1879 redesign for an exterior so elaborate that the Monument would have been unrecognizable as an obelisk. Lack of funds prevented anything more than the bare obelisk from being erected. The absence of any vegetation around it emphasizes the simplicity of the Monument. It rises directly from the barely covered mound of earth.

Although the Washington Monument is a memorial to a man, there is no trace of him in the Monument. He is completely sublated in the symbol representing him. Hence it is different in kind from the Mall's other memorials to men. The Washington Monument is iconic only in a rather abstract sense, and in representing Washington it is not a means for a further symbol. By contrast, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials are, as it were, houses for the statues residing within, and to that extent each is a means to a further end. The symbolism they possess independently of their function as beautiful houses is limited; they are not in themselves icons. In any event, no statue resides in the obelisk; hence the connection

between it and Washington himself is not especially obvious.⁸ The obelisk represents a ray of the sun, and the sun-god is the source of life, warmth, light. The obelisk is a heliocentric monument. Thus, as I have already noted, the other monuments may be said to rotate around the Washington Monument like planets in its orbit. The VVM, by contrast, is a chthonic memorial. As a ray from the sun the obelisk both reaches upward to the sun and connects the sun with the earth. Washington is thus the enlightener, transmitter of life to humanity, a brilliant beam in an otherwise dark world. Looking at the monument one's eye is naturally drawn upward toward the bright divine orb of which the divine man is a part. The obelisk connotes immortality, which is an imitation of the eternity of the heavens. We cannot ignore, moreover, the blatantly phallic nature of this monument, a characteristic which heightens the contrast between it and the Capitol. The latter's dome is of an obviously female nature. The male/female contrast is to be found in other cities as well (for example, consider the contrast between the obelisk and dome in St. Peter's Square in Rome). Washington was a man of action rather than words; the Capitol is the home of endless talk, a trait traditionally, albeit tendentiously, associated with womanliness.

Obelisks originated in a civilization reputed even among the ancients to be very old, namely that of Egypt. The founder of the New World republic is thus tied to the very origins of political life, a seeming paradox repeated elsewhere on the Mall: the American Revolution is conceived of as a turn backward as well as a turn forward, a return to origins as well as to the new. Of course, the intention was always to memorialize Washington in the way that would make the city named after him resemble the great capitals of Europe. No great city would be complete without its obelisk, as the treasures conveyed to Paris following Napoleon's looting of Egypt served to remind everyone. Thus the Washington Monument also expresses the belief that America is equal in its greatness to the old European nations. The American Founders, then, are not meant to be *radical* innovators. The architecturally represented origins of political life in the case of the Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln memorials are, I add, all pagan.

Further, the Washington Monument has a characteristic that no other on the Mall possesses: it looks exactly the same from all angles. Correspondingly, it is not oriented toward any of the four points on the compass. For this reason as well the Washington Monument is divinely indifferent to the perspective of the beholder, like the unshadowed light itself. This indifference is emphasized by the fact that there is no writing on its sides, and so no sequence in which the eye must "read" the obelisk.⁹ The Washington Monument can be seen as a whole all at once, from any side. Lincoln and Jefferson, by contrast, are surrounded by their own words, and their memorials have a front and back. The Washington Monument does not carve out a space particular to itself, a space into

which the beholder is drawn and thus disconnected from the surroundings. It is not an absorbing monument in the way the VVM is. This helps to explain why, although people look and refer to this monument, they rarely sit and contemplate it and infrequently celebrate or demonstrate at its base. None of this contradicts the fact that the Washington Monument also serves as the center of the Mall, if not of the city. It is a space-defining, orienting structure even as (or perhaps because) it is indifferent to this or that perspective.

The other memorial to which the VVM points is dedicated to Lincoln (see fig. 3). The architecture of this monument is (except for the flat roof and the plan) mostly Greek. The monument itself serves in good part as a home for the statue that dwells within; its meaning thus conveys the classical pattern of a hero whose deeds have won him immortality and divinization. The singularly appropriate inscription behind Lincoln's statue reads "IN THIS TEMPLE AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN IS ENSHRINED FOREVER." Like Athena in the Parthenon on the Acropolis, Lincoln the savior and healer lives in his temple, a god awaiting offerings. Perhaps the two urns outside the temple are meant to contain eternal flames symbolizing the god's presence in his home. To reach the icon of Lincoln one must ascend a considerable number of (oversize) steps, as



FIG. 3.

is appropriate when one approaches a hero-god. Similarly, the statue to Jefferson occupies the heights at the summit of a series of steps. To get to the heart of the VVM, by contrast, one must descend, not ascend. The Doric columns of the Lincoln Memorial are tilted slightly inward, a fact that enhances one's impression of the building's monumental elevation. Inside, Lincoln is seated—almost wearily, it seems to me—like Zeus high on his throne, looking down on his relatively puny visitor. The visitor's sight, however, is drawn up no higher than the level Lincoln occupies, unless it be to read the inscription behind and slightly above him. In a Gothic cathedral, by contrast, the upward emphasis continues as far as the eye can see. Here, as at the Jefferson Memorial, the visitor's focus on the graven image of the hero-god contributes to the predominantly pagan effect of the monument, though there are also nonpagan overtones.

The air of dignified mourning conveyed even by the choice of vegetation surrounding the temple—cypresses are by tradition funereal trees—reminds us that Lincoln's mortal life was ended by assassination. The interior of the monument is open only from one side; hence there is a somber darkness inside. The adversity faced by Lincoln is evident not only from the quotations on the wall inside his temple (the Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural Address) but from Lincoln's face. It is the face of a just and compassionate judge who has seen much bitterness, a face hardened by war and difficult choices—and in particular by a war between brothers, the sort that is always full of the greatest hate. Lincoln's face is etched with the lessons taught by destructive war; it is thus quite unlike that of Jefferson's statue.

Lincoln's temple also expresses the hope for the rebirth of peace among brothers which union would bring. Thus it is worth emphasizing that Lincoln faces east, as did the statues of the gods in their temples. At the same time, the bitter context from which Lincoln emerged is symbolized by the fact that his temple resides at the west end of the Mall. The sun sets in the west; it is the place where light is extinguished, where souls are taken upon dying. The sunset represents, furthermore, the struggle between light and darkness, good and evil.¹⁰ This struggle provides the context for Lincoln's apotheosis; hence it is appropriate that he be the western god who looks east. As though looking back on this struggle, Lincoln gazes out of his temple and across the Mall into the impassive face of General Grant.

Lincoln's temple is, then, a monument to national unity achieved by the martyrdom of Lincoln himself. The overtones of Christ's dying for the sins of man are unavoidable. Indeed, the principles praised by Lincoln, above all that of universal equality, are not Greek but Christian. The Lincoln Memorial, precisely because of its somberness and its emphasis on sacrifice as well as on the healing of dissolution, differs radically from the monuments on the Mall to two of the nation's Founders, Washington and Jefferson. Washington and Jefferson are not healers so much as life-

givers. By the time of Lincoln the age of the Founders was over; their optimism had been severely tested by the worst sort of internal conflict; costly reinstitution of the Founding had become necessary. The Washington and Jefferson monuments represent the opening chapter in our history; the Lincoln monument perhaps a middle chapter; and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial graphically represents a very recent chapter of our past in a way that points to, indeed cites, the two earlier ones. The great moral message of the Lincoln Memorial—which is subdued in, if not lacking from, the Washington and Jefferson monuments—makes it the natural place for people to proclaim and demonstrate their views. To be precise, it is not the interior of this monument that is suited for the gathering of the people (and in this it again differs from the Gothic cathedral) but its steps on the exterior.

Before passing on to the Jefferson Memorial, I note that the Arlington Memorial Bridge (dedicated in 1932) extends from the Lincoln Memorial southwest across the Potomac to General Lee's house. Thus it symbolizes Lincoln's effort to save the union by reuniting North and South. Lincoln, not Lee, is memorialized on the Mall, showing which of them prevailed in their conflict (in the District of Columbia as a whole, twenty-five statues remember Union officers but only two memorialize Confederate officers).¹¹ That Lincoln should, as it were, extend a bridge to his former enemy shows his "malice toward none" and "charity for all."

The Jefferson Memorial is the most delicate of the memorials on the Mall. Its graceful architecture speaks not of war but of reason, not of mourning but of life. To be sure, the circular design traditionally connoted, among other things, a tomb; the Jefferson Memorial has antecedents in Rome's Mausoleum of Augustus, that of Hadrian, and the so-called Temple of Vesta by the Tiber. Still earlier antecedents are the Greek *tholoi*.¹² Unlike the Lincoln Memorial, if the Jefferson Memorial suggests death, it does so in so delicate and allusive a way as to virtually dissolve any sense of loss the observer might otherwise feel. The music of the Memorial's proportions is pleasing to the eye and the mind. Again, the design is Roman; the dome resembles that of the Roman Pantheon, a building Jefferson admired very much (though the Memorial lacks the oculus, or round "eye," which opens the structure to the sky). The dome of the Pantheon symbolized the vault of the heavens. In this New World pantheon symbolized by the Jefferson Memorial, the gods are reason, the rights of man, and the freedom of the individual from political and religious tyranny.¹³ I add that both the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials have a front and a back; hence neither is indifferent to perspective in the way that the Washington Monument is.

The contributions that Jefferson wished to have written on his epitaph were the authorship of the Declaration of Independence, the founding

of the University of Virginia, and the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom—Jefferson did not mention his two terms as president. The statue of Jefferson in the Memorial holds a scroll on which the Declaration is written. The Jefferson Memorial is clearly a hero-cult monument, but the demigod within is a cultural or intellectual hero, rather than a military or executive hero. Jefferson did not serve in the field of battle or command troops in a war, as Washington and Lincoln did. In this regard the memorial to Jefferson has something in common with another presidential memorial, the Kennedy Center (the city's cultural center). The statue of Jefferson is standing; unlike Lincoln, he has not been tired by the trials of civil war. The eyes look straight ahead (unlike those of Lincoln) with confidence, and one foot is slightly forward. The general impression given is that of gentle aggressiveness, purposive but controlled movement forward.

The dignity of civic virtue and intelligence—in short, the dignity of man as distinguished from the beasts—is clearly evident in this statue. Man can stand on his own two feet, guided by principles self-evident to reason and supported by the inherent orderliness of the natural world in which he exists. The light penetrates inside the Memorial from all sides, in contrast to the Lincoln Memorial. The rays of the sun symbolized by the obelisk are permitted to enter everywhere; Jefferson is open to the outside world and stays in touch with it. In this the Memorial is quite unlike the inside of a cathedral in which even the light is altered by stained glass windows, an invitation to forget the outside world so as to better remember incorporeal spirit within.¹⁴ The Jefferson Memorial is not a temple.¹⁵

Jefferson wears a smile which resembles that of Mona Lisa—not the sort of expression a sunlike god or martyred savior would wear, but not a merely human grin either.¹⁶ He is not smiling at any particular thing; rather, it is an expression that might accompany the activity of reflection and perhaps of listening. It is an almost philosophical smile. Correspondingly, Jefferson's statue faces north. The north is the region of darkness, a place of depth, mystery, questions, and all things interior. It represents the direction toward which the mind of the philosophical Jefferson would naturally be drawn. At the same time, Jefferson's belief that the mind can enlighten itself is reflected in the location of his memorial on the southern edge of the Mall. The south is the place of the sun, illumination, warmth, *physis*, the visible look (*eidōs*, *idea*), the intelligible shape of things.

At Jefferson's feet are the capitals of two columns, one decorated with corn—the symbol of the New World—the other with the traditional design of Corinthian capitals. The vegetation outside includes the famous cherry trees, row after row of them—beautiful symbols of spring, of rebirth and natural order. This memorial is not a shrine in the sense that the Lincoln Memorial is, and it does not convey a clear moral principle as Lincoln's does. It is inspiring, but not moving in the way that Lincoln's

memorial is. It recalls abstract principles and arguments rather than bitter deeds or exhausting foundings. Perhaps this is the reason that the VVM does not point to it. It is as though the VVM asks whether America's involvement in Vietnam was true to Lincoln's justice and healing as well as to Washington's founding intentions, struggles against foreign tyrants, and military genius, rather than whether it was true to Jefferson's thoughts about higher education and the freedom of religion.

With the basic symbolism of the Mall in mind, we can prepare ourselves further for the VVM by looking very briefly at several war memorials in its immediate vicinity, beginning with those that are most unlike it and progressing to those more akin to it. The most obviously unlike the VVM is the Marine Corps Memorial, dedicated in 1954 and popularly called the Iwo Jima Memorial. It is a classic war memorial. The soldiers strain every muscle toward one end only, the raising of the flag. The monument shouts this imperative: Honor your country, act as nobly as these men have. It is modeled on a photograph of an event that occurred on 23 February 1945. The inscription on the side reads "IN HONOR AND MEMORY OF THE MEN OF THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS WHO HAVE GIVEN THEIR LIVES TO THEIR COUNTRY SINCE 10 NOVEMBER 1775." Vietnam too is listed on the monument's side. The focus is not so much on individuals but on one branch of the military—an obvious difference between it and the VVM. I note also that the VVM is explicitly dedicated not just to those who died but to all those who fought. The symbolism of the Marine Corps War Memorial is not abstract, as is that of the Washington Monument; its iconography is literal as well as unambiguous and immediately intelligible. In these respects it is also very unlike the VVM.

The memorial to the Seabees (just across Arlington Memorial Bridge, on the appropriately named Avenue of the Heroes section of Memorial Drive which leads to Arlington National Cemetery) proceeds along the same lines (see fig. 4). The Seabees are builders and rebuilders rather than destroyers, as is evident from the panels on the wall behind the statues: This memorial conveys a kind of giving warmth. The Seabee and the boy (who is clearly foreign) almost seem engaged in a gentle dance. The contrast between the boy's vulnerability and the soldier's tremendous strength heightens the goodness to which the soldier's great power has been turned. The Seabee's uncovered chest follows the pattern of what is called heroic nudity. Like the Iwo Jima Memorial, this monument focuses on those who fought in a particular branch of the service. In this sense both monuments are generic.

Across the street from this memorial is another, curiously called The Hiker, erected to commemorate our cause in the Spanish-American War and dedicated in 1965 (see fig. 5). The no-nonsense woodsman-turned-soldier is quaint to us, but the message is clear. A bronze plaque on the

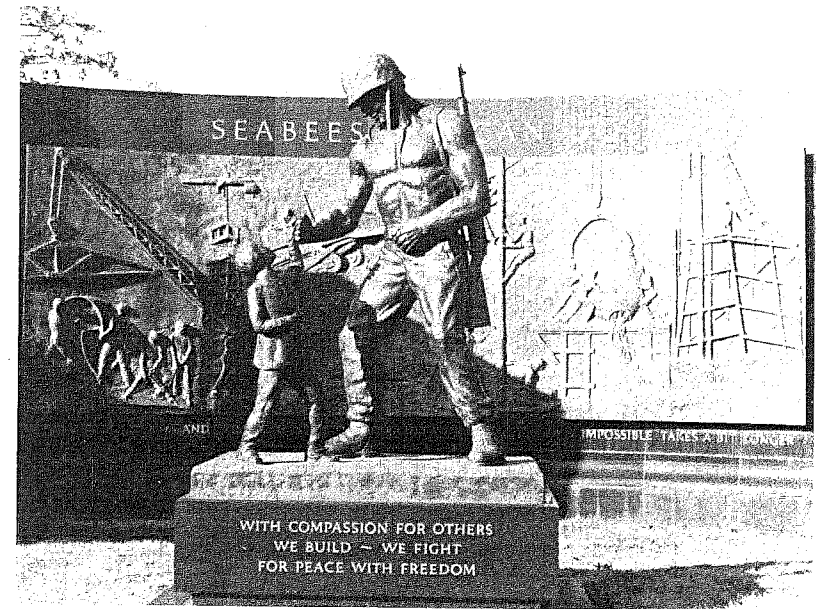


FIG. 4.



FIG. 5.

pedestal depicts a woman in supplicant pose before two American servicemen; she evidently represents the countries just "liberated" by them. American servicemen are the force of good.

The memorial to Ulysses S. Grant (dedicated in 1922) is far more ambiguous in its meaning, and so it bears a closer resemblance to the VVM than do any of the war memorials just discussed (see fig. 6). I would not go so far as to call it an antiwar monument; but it certainly neither glorifies war nor is heroic in any way. Grant looks distinctly ghostlike on top of his horse. The horse itself is not in heroic pose. Its tail is between its legs, indicating that the wind is coming from behind and so that it is stationary and not attacking. Grant is watching a battle plainly heard by the horse, a battle which Grant's side may or may not be winning. But there is no emotion on his face. Glory, the statue seems to say, is evanescent. The group of statues on his right depict Union troops on the attack (see fig. 7). Here again the accent is not on glory. The sculptor of this monument, Henry Merwin Shrady, went to extremes to ensure complete realism, and in this he succeeded. The tremendous tension and effort of the

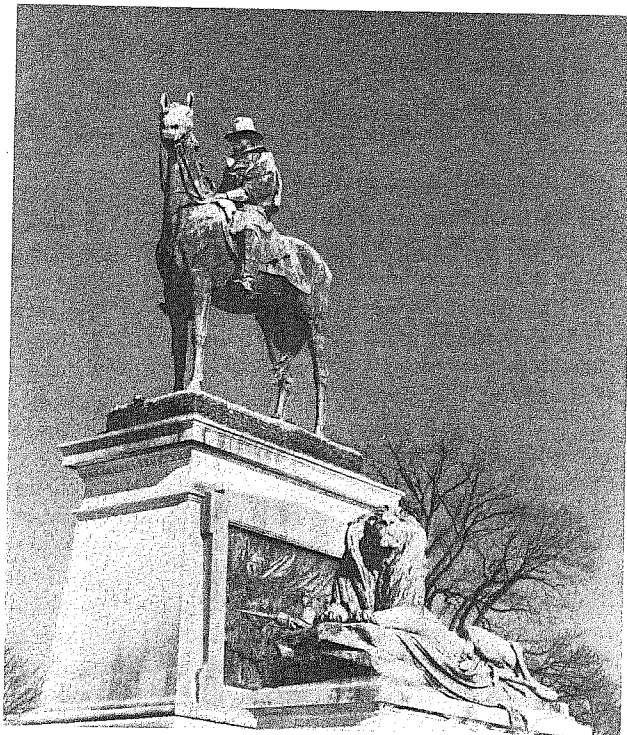


FIG. 6.



FIG. 7.

human figures' forward movement says more about them as men than about the virtues of their cause. In fact, one of them is about to be trampled to death by the horses of his comrades, only one of whom notices the immanent tragedy. To Grant's left is another group of statues, this time artillerymen pulling a caisson through deep mud. It is hard to say whether they are attacking or retreating; the emphasis is on the severe strain of war.

The Grant Memorial as a whole does not convey a moral lesson, and in this it resembles the VVM. One thinks, first, of all the death and dying suffered in war. Perhaps this characteristic of the Grant Memorial is due in part to the nature of the war it portrays. In a fight against one's brothers it is more difficult to feel without ambiguity that one is engaged in a battle between good and evil, a battle in which there can be a clear-cut winner and loser. This is the only memorial on the Mall explicitly showing battle scenes; on the whole the Mall is very unwarlike. Appropriately enough; the Grant Memorial sits on the western front of the Capitol and looks west, out across the Mall, in the direction of the Lincoln Memorial as well as Lee's house and the vast cemetery next to it. Recall that the west represents, via the sunset, the conflict between opposing forces—the battle which Grant, high upon his horse, studies. In the Mall complex the whole great oppositional struggle of war, and particularly of the Civil War, is oriented to the west. The presence of the facing Lincoln and Grant Memorials on the Mall, indeed on the same east-west axis, virtually establishes the Civil War as *the* critical event recollected on the Mall. The VVM too, let us note, sits at the western end of the Mall,

and the war it recalls ignited much bitter dispute between Americans—bitterness second only, perhaps, to that which accompanied the Civil War.

The Second Division Memorial (1936) glorifies a division of the army but in a peculiarly symbolic way (see fig. 8). The whole syntax of heroic images is compressed into a flaming sword of justice, held by a hand cut off from its body. This is an architectural version of synecdoche; the flaming sword in the sky stands for divine justice. The abstractness of this memorial distinguishes it from those we have examined but ties it to the VVM. The names of various places the division has fought are inscribed on the walls. The memorial is dedicated "to our dead," as in the case of the Iwo Jima Memorial.

The most thoroughly symbolic of all Washington's war memorials lies just across the Potomac alongside the George Washington Memorial Parkway. The Navy-Marine Memorial was dedicated in 1934 to those who perished at sea in the service of their country (see fig. 9). The seven delicately balanced gulls represent the souls of the dead. The symbolic representation of the disembodied soul as a bird is ancient and possesses a very rich history. There is no literal suggestion whatever in this war memorial as to its theme or purpose, and in this it is most like the VVM.

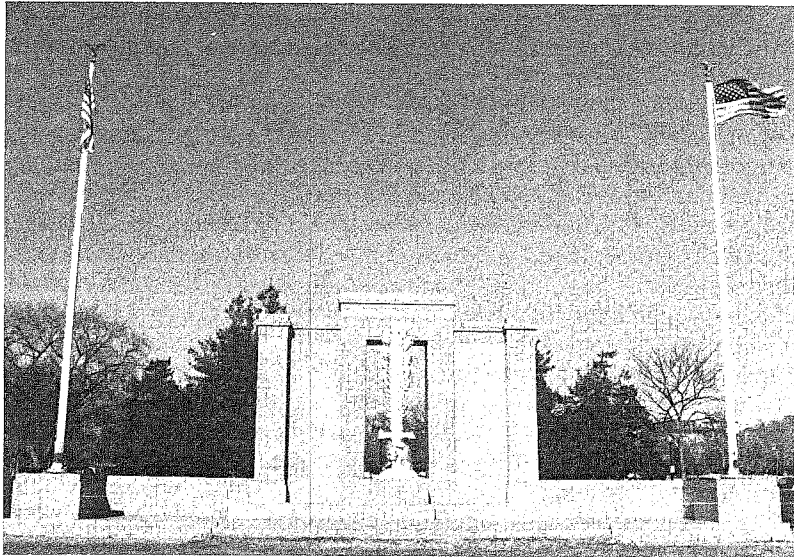


FIG. 8.



FIG. 9.

3

We are finally prepared to consider the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The VVM initially seems extremely simple in its design, and in this as well as in its not being a means to a further symbol it resembles the obelisk to which it points. Like that obelisk, it is not really beautiful in the way that the Jefferson Memorial is. The VVM basically consists of two walls of polished black granite meeting at a 125-degree, 12-minute angle and tapering off at each end. These tips point like arrowheads to the Washington and Lincoln monuments. The angle is not, then, just any angle. The monument is utterly symmetrical. Its two halves are, when considered in abstraction from the directions they point, identical except in the names inscribed and the dates of death. The wall supports nothing and is not supported by any other structure; there is no internal tension in the design. Since the wall's back is against the earth, the Memorial is in no way indifferent to the position of the beholder.

Most of the other memorials on the Mall are either classical in design or have classical antecedents. It is difficult to find any allusion in the VVM to a historical style except by visual incorporation of the two monuments to which it points. Furthermore, unlike all the other memorials discussed so far, the VVM is invisible from a distance, particularly as one approaches it from the north (the outlines of the Memorial are visible

when one reaches the flagpole and statues located between it and the Lincoln Memorial to the southwest). It demands that you enter into its space or miss it altogether. When approaching the Memorial from the northeast, the first thing one sees is a stand manned by Vietnam veterans soliciting support for the search for servicemen listed as missing in action. Another such stand presently exists on the southwestern approach to the monument. I mention this because it points to a fact which is not physically part of the architecture of this memorial but which is nevertheless revealing of it: it is a living monument in a way that is not true of the others I have discussed. It is almost impossible to visit this monument without encountering Vietnam veterans. And they generally are not just sitting and chatting but are usually involved very emotionally and publicly in the Memorial. I have seen many stand and weep there. The designer of the Memorial wanted it to serve as an occasion for therapeutic catharsis, and in this she has succeeded.¹⁷ One can sit and have lunch at the Jefferson Memorial, fly a kite at the Washington Monument; one can smile at the gentleness of the Seabees' Memorial; children can play on the nearby statue of Einstein;¹⁸ but one cannot treat the VVM with informality or familiarity.

One must, then, come upon the VVM suddenly. It is quite possible to happen upon it almost by accident, as I did. Once there, however, one is led into it gently.¹⁹ One sees a few names whose order is initially not clear; then more names; then many more. There are no steps at this memorial, making it easily accessible to handicapped veterans. One walks down an incline to its heart, which is precisely where the incline is reversed and climbs up again. The centralizing axis of the monument is horizontal (whereas that of the other memorials I have discussed, with the possible exception of the Grant Memorial, is vertical). The slowness of one's exposure to the Memorial is merciful, for initial surprise turns slowly, rather than all at once, to shock as one realizes what one is looking at: the nearly 58,000 names of those Americans who died and are missing in action as a result of this war.

Since one walks down into the embrace of the memorial, it engulfs the visitor even though the open sky is always overhead and a large wide open space faces the monument. Yet one does not have the experience of descending into a tomb or grave; the VVM does not close the visitor in, not even in the way that the Lincoln Memorial may be said to do so. The walls of the mural-like monument face south—the direction of warmth and life—so as to catch the maximum sunlight. In the descent toward the center of the monument there may be a delicate allusion to the ancient *tholos* tomb (such as the "tomb of Agamemnon" at Mycenae), buried in the earth and approached by an angled, graded passage downward. Yet even if this allusion is present, it is not strong enough to give the VVM a tomblike feeling. I do not deny that the inscription of the names on the polished black granite closely resembles the gravestones in so many

American cemeteries, a resemblance accentuated by the presence of flowers and small flags which visitors to the VVM frequently leave at its base; the VVM is to that extent a sort of national gravestone. But I do wish to emphasize that the VVM is not tomblike or morose, and also that it possesses complex dimensions of meaning not exhibited by any ordinary gravestone. The suddenness of the visitor's entry into the Memorial's space, the demand that one give one's complete attention to it even while remaining in a completely natural setting (without even a roof overhead), the impossibility of avoiding it once there—all these effects would be lost if the Memorial stood on higher ground, in plain view from a distance.

The logical (and chronological) beginning of the monument is neither of the two tips at which one necessarily enters into its space, but rather the point at which the two walls intersect. Thus as one starts at the geographic beginning of the Memorial (either of the two tips), one is actually starting partway through the list of names. The rows of names begin at the intersection of the two walls, on the top of the right-hand wall, and follow each other with merciless continuity, panel by panel, to the eastern tip of that wall, which points to the Washington Monument. The sequence resumes at the western tip, which points to the Lincoln Memorial, and terminates at the bottom of the left-hand wall. Thus the list both ends and begins at the center of the monument. When one has read halfway through the list all the way to the eastern tip, one's eyes are naturally drawn to the Washington Monument. The visitor who continued to read the names in the proper sequence would be forced to turn and walk to the other end of the Memorial and so to see the Lincoln Memorial. One's reading of the VVM, in other words, is interrupted halfway through by the sight of the two other symbols. The monument thus invites one to pause midway and consider the significance of the names in the light of our memories of Washington and Lincoln. Moreover, in reading the names on the Memorial one is necessarily reading from west to east, from the direction of death to that of resurrection and new life. However, one is forced to double back toward the west in order to finish reading the catalog of names. The complexity of the monument's directionality is further illuminated by the following: although the face of the VVM is directed to the south, the Memorial also resembles the tip of an arrow which is pointing north, to the region of the dark and the mysterious. The VVM thus shares with the Jefferson Memorial a probing of reasons and fate, an effort to grasp in thought recalcitrant reality.

I cannot help but mention that the peculiar way in which the VVM begins and ends—with the names of the first and last Americans to die in Vietnam—reminds us of a rather sad fact about the Vietnam War. That conflict had neither an official start (in sharp contrast, for example, with President Roosevelt's statesmanlike appeal for a declaration of war on Japan) nor an official end (there were no real celebrations, no parades

for the returning veterans, just silence). But the disturbing inarticulateness of the Vietnam War, which is in one sense embodied in the organization of the VVM, is in another sense overcome by the VVM's intricate symbolism and, indeed, simply by the existence of the Memorial on the Mall. Its very presence there bespeaks national recognition of and respect for the veterans' service, and to that extent articulates a certain settling of accounts.

The list of names both ends and begins at the center of the monument, suggesting that the monument is both open and closed: open physically, at a very wide angle, like a weak "V" for "victory" (a "V" lying on its side, instead of with its arms pointing upwards); but closed in substance—the war is over. This simultaneous openness and closure becomes all the more interesting when we realize that the VVM iconically represents a book. The pages are covered with writing, and the book is open partway through. The closure just mentioned is the closure not of the book but of a chapter in it. The openness indicates that further chapters have yet to be written, and read. It is important that the back of the monument is to the earth, for the suggestion that the Vietnam War is a chapter in the book of American history, and that further chapters remain in the book, would be lost if the wall were above ground, backed by thin air. The wall lies against the earth, indeed against the hallowed earth at the core of the nation's capital. Our future lies there, in our nation's soil as it were. This is the soil of the Constitution Gardens, of the memorializing Mall, of the spiritual heart of the country. By inviting us to understand the Vietnam War in this context, the VVM accurately reflects the etymological meaning of "monument" I have already mentioned: the VVM asks us not just to remember that war, it admonishes us to write the next chapter thoughtfully and with reflection on the country's values, symbols of which are pointed to by the Memorial itself.

Two short inscriptions on the Memorial tell why these names are being memorialized. Both are written at the point where the two walls meet, one at the apex of the right-hand one, after the date "1959" (in which the first American was killed), and the other on the bottom of the left-hand one, after the date "1975" (when the last American was killed). The first of these inscriptions reads "IN HONOR OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR. THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES AND OF THOSE WHO REMAIN MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THEY WERE TAKEN FROM US." The second reads "OUR NATION HONORS THE COURAGE, SACRIFICE AND DEVOTION TO DUTY AND COUNTRY OF ITS VIETNAM VETERANS. THIS MEMORIAL WAS BUILT WITH PRIVATE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE. NOVEMBER 11, 1982." I have already noted that the other war memorials we have looked at honor those who died, not all those who fought. The point is emphasized even by the monument's title: it is a memorial to the Vietnam *veterans*, not the Vietnam War. It honors everyone who fought there without qualification, thus suggesting that they had

not previously been honored by the American people. The Memorial is a source of pride to Vietnam veterans, and this explains why it is a living memorial. Clearly the vets view it as *their* memorial, a way of proclaiming and redeeming the honor of *their* service to the country. It is as though just having fought in that war deserves praise, as though doing so was above and beyond the call of duty. Perhaps the war's eventual unpopularity, along with the ambiguity of its purposes and of the nation's commitment to fulfilling its stated aims, gives weight to this suggestion.

It should be obvious by now that there is nothing heroic about this memorial. It suggests honor without glory. The VVM is not inspiring in the usual way that memorials are. The focus throughout is on individuals, not on a flag (no flag was included in the original design, and the flagpole added subsequently in no way violates the VVM's space), or on a sword of divine justice, or on good deeds rendered to those we died to protect, or anything else of the sort.²⁰ Even the appearance of a mechanical and impersonal order is avoided. Such an order would have arisen if the names were alphabetized or divided into categories according to the branches of the armed forces (the monuments to the Second Division, Seabees, and Marines, by contrast, focus on one of the services). The chronology of this war is marked by the death of individuals. In this sense it is appropriate that the VVM sits at the west end of the Mall, given the symbolism of the four directions. And a visitor searching for a particular name is forced to read a number of other names, so paying attention once again to individuals.

It is true that the monument speaks first of all, but by no means exclusively, of loss and pain. As the Memorial's architect pointed out, it is physically a gash in the earth, a scar only partially healed by the trees and the grass and the polish.²¹ The VVM is not a comforting memorial; it is perhaps because of this, rather than in spite of it, that it possesses remarkable therapeutic capacity. When people find on the VVM the name they've been looking for, they touch, even caress it, remembering. One sees this ritual repeated over and over. It is often followed by another, the tracing of the name on a piece of paper. The paper is then carefully folded up and taken home, and the marks of the dead left in stone thus become treasured signatures for the living.

Usually the names of individuals who die in a war are listed on a monument in their hometown. The VVM makes the loss of these individuals a matter of national concern. This has been one of the main causes for the controversy over the monument. Some persons (such as President Reagan's first Secretary of the Interior, James Watt) insisted that the cause for which these individuals died be praised. As a result of the pressure brought to bear, a realistic statue of three soldiers (two of them white, one black) sculpted by Frederick Hart, and a flagpole, have been added in the area between the VVM and the Lincoln Memorial (the dedication ceremony was held on Veterans Day, 13 November 1984).

They are thus at some distance from the VVM and function as a kind of entrance device for those approaching from the southwest or as an exit device for those leaving in the same direction (see fig. 10). Neither addition in any way interferes with one's contemplation of the VVM except to the extent that one might catch a reflection of the flagpole in the surface of the Memorial. For all practical purposes, the visitor to the VVM must literally turn his back to these additions.

The soldiers seem to have just emerged from the trees and to be contemplating the names inscribed on the VVM. The look on their faces is not heroic; in this respect they recall the statuary of the Grant Memorial. Since the flagpole is itself some fifty feet in the direction of the Lincoln Memorial from the statue, the two additions do not, so far as I can tell, form a substantive unity. The inscription at the base of the flagpole reads "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." Seals of the five armed services (Coast Guard, Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force) also adorn the base. The statue and flagpole add a conventional, representational dimension to the nation's memorializing of the Vietnam veterans. Yet the physical and aesthetic distance between these two additions and the VVM is so great



FIG. 10.

that there exists no tension between them. All three finally just seem to be separate memorials. Their presence on the same plot of land will eventually seem, I think, like faint echoes of the old and bitter debates about the Vietnam War, briefly reignited in the recent discussions about the political iconography suitable to memorializing it.

In any event, by emphasizing the sacrifice so many individuals have made, the VVM surely asks us to think about whether the sacrifice was worthwhile and whether it should be made again. The VVM is, in my opinion, fundamentally interrogative; it does *not* take a position as to the answers. It implies some terrible questions: Did these individuals die in vain? Was their death in keeping with our nation's best traditions as symbolized by the nearby monuments? For what and when should Americans die in war? That the person contemplating the monument is implicated in these questions is also emphasized by another crucial aspect of this memorial, namely that the polished black granite functions as a mirror. This fact gives added depth to the monument and mitigates any sense of its being a tomb. In looking at the names one cannot help seeing oneself looking at them. On a bright day one also sees the reflections of the Washington or Lincoln memorials along with one's own reflection. The dead and living thus meet, and the living are forced to ask whether those names should be on that wall, and whether others should die in similar causes. You are forced to wonder where you were then and what role you played in the war. Nineteen sixty-nine, perhaps one of your college years: as you studied books, these people were dying one after the other.

The VVM compels us to contemplate difficult questions with a clear awareness of the inevitable cost in human life. The Memorial does not claim that life is the most precious of all things, but it does force us to wonder when it is worth giving up. In looking at the polished walls of the VVM, the visitor is facing north. The viewer enters by reflection into the depth of the memorial; beyond the southern sunlight which shines off the surface, into the northern region of dark mysteries and difficult questions. The Washington and Lincoln memorials are continually present as one enters that region; they help to give shape and direction to our questions.

The invitation to contemplate the Vietnam War and the whole issue of America's involvement in similar wars is accented in yet another way. Set directly in nature, the monument is undisturbed by the turbulence and constant fermentation of human affairs. The landscaped grounds in front of the Memorial function like the bowl of a theater in which one may sit and observe. The VVM is thus simultaneously an extraordinarily moving monument as well as one which demands the detachment of thought from emotions. The Memorial presents, in the context of the Mall's Constitution Gardens, the tremendous human cost of the Vietnam War, and on *that* basis asks us to think about whether such a war is just.

The monument performs the valuable service of reminding us to question, without forcing any simple answers upon us.

The *interrogative* character of the Memorial requires that it not commit itself overtly to answering to these questions. Hence the seemingly apolitical nature of the monument and its separation of war and politics. Appropriately absent from the dedication of the Memorial were sectarian politics and politicians (with the exception of Senator John Warner, who was welcomed warmly thanks to his support of the VVM). The dedication was organized and run by the veterans themselves. The healing value of the dedication and the Memorial would have been compromised if either had become an official government event. The presence of the president, for example, would surely have stirred up bitter feelings for and against the war, and served as an occasion for the expression of a good deal of anger which many feel toward the government for its conduct of the war and treatment of its veterans.

I mention all this because it reminds us that a main purpose of the Memorial is therapeutic, a point absolutely essential for an adequate understanding of the VVM. This purpose was not explicitly called for in the design competition but is implied by one of the rules which guided it, namely that the monument make no overt political statement. It was generally understood that what the nation needed was a monument that would heal the veterans as well as the rest of us, rather than exacerbate old wounds and reignite old passions. The interrogative character of the monument's architecture must be understood in the light of that purpose, and this purpose cannot be understood in abstraction from the severe conflicts of the times. In a way that is true of the Civil War but not of the two World Wars, the Vietnam War split the American people into warring factions united only by their hate for each other.

But this does not mean that neutrality is the state of health that the VVM's therapy is ultimately intended to produce. For the Vietnam veterans, that state of health is, at the very least, the sense of wholeness made possible by a reaffirmation of the values for which the nation stands. That is, the monument's neutrality about the merits of the Vietnam War is intended to make possible proclamation of the honor of the veterans' service in Vietnam, and rejection of the suspicion that they did something shameful by answering their country's call. As part of one of the inscriptions on the VVM states, "Our nation honors the courage, sacrifice and devotion to duty and country of its Vietnam veterans." With this monument the veterans can reaffirm their pride in having served their country and so their pride in being Americans. Within that framework, furthermore, veterans and nonveterans alike are encouraged by the VVM to contemplate the difficult questions raised by America's involvement in the Vietnam War, and that too is a salutary effect of the monument. Thus at the VVM

veterans can reconcile their doubts about the conduct and even the purposes of the war with their belief that their service was honorable, and nonveterans can retain the same doubts but also affirm the veterans' sacrifice. The VVM is not, then, therapeutic in a simply "psychological" way; its therapy depends on an understanding of certain overreaching values. Precisely that understanding was evidenced at the dedication of the Memorial, a day that was genuinely and openly patriotic, a day on which many veterans expressed their love of the United States. The striking and—given the long debates about the Vietnam War—unexpected expressions of patriotism which one still witnesses at the VVM would not be possible if the monument were explicitly heroic or took a side in the arguments about the war.

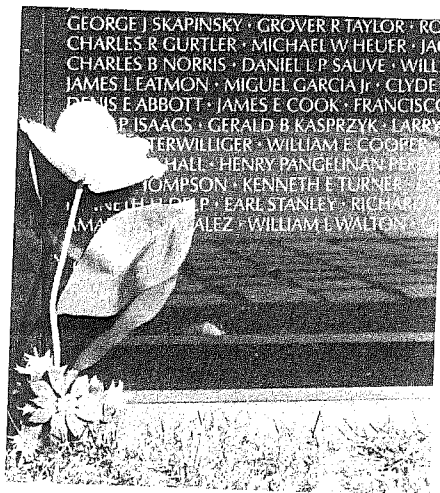
That the author of the winning design of the VVM turned out to be a woman of oriental extraction too young to have experienced the Vietnam War herself looks like another instance of the unifying work of the "invisible hand" evident in the Mall as a whole. Even with respect to the designer of the VVM, the unexpected has conspired to reconcile the seeming contraries of east and west, male and female, youth and experience. Even here, the theme of healing is evident.

In sum, the monument has in fact accomplished the goal that those who have objected to it also praise: the goal of rekindling love of country and its ideals, as well as reconciliation with one's fellow citizens. In this crucial sense the VVM is not "neutral"—far from it. It neither separates war and politics completely nor proclaims a given political interpretation of the Vietnam War. This accomplishment of the Memorial tends to be missed by its critics. Differently put, the architecture of the VVM encourages us to question America's involvement in the Vietnam War *on the basis of* a firm sense of both the value of human life and the still higher value of the American principles so eloquently articulated by Washington and Lincoln, among others. This is the key to the Memorial's therapeutic potential. Because they have failed to understand this, critics of the VVM have held that the Memorial would quickly become a rallying place for all sorts of "anti-American" groups. This prophecy has not—and I think will not—come true. On the other hand, the VVM has not—and again I believe will not—become a rallying place for unreflective and unrestrained exhibitions of a country's self-love. For these reasons the VVM is a remarkably philosophical monument, quite in keeping with America's admirable tradition of reflective and interrogative patriotism. The VVM embodies the ability of Americans to confront the sorrow of so many lost lives in a war of ambiguous virtue without succumbing to the false muses of intoxicating propaganda and nihilism.

The patriotism expressed during the Memorial's dedication was informed by the healthy willingness to question the decisions of the politicians of the day about where and when Americans should die for their country. The monument's ability to engender declarations of patriotism is quite

in keeping with such an interrogative character. If the Memorial momentarily separates war and politics, it is in order to give us a more secure foundation for understanding both.²² The sentiments of those who attended and addressed the Memorial's dedication were clear: America is worth dying for, but she must not fight a war when there is no popular consensus for doing so, and she must not fight without the intention to win decisively. Correspondingly, she must not fight under conditions where it is impossible to win.

But, as I have said, the overwhelming sentiment felt at the Memorial's dedication was patriotic, and so therapeutic. Even as the speakers expressed fears of entangling foreign alliances, most everyone seemed to feel that America is still like a ray of the sun in a somber world. In this way the ceremony and the Memorial once again served the cause of union. Complete strangers embraced each other. I repeatedly heard people saying "welcome home" to veterans, as though they had not been back all the while. I shall never forget the sight of Vietnam veterans who, though looking somewhat tired in their tattered combat fatigues, proclaimed by their very costume that they were proud to have accepted the call of their country. One veteran was dressed partly in combat fatigues and partly in the sort of leather attire favored by motorcycle gangs. His lined face and disheveled hair spoke of countless trials and difficulties undergone since returning home. He stood there silently during the dedication staring at the ground with one arm raised high, holding for all to see a miniature American flag. At the conclusion of the ceremony he joined in the refrain of "God Bless America." Those words swept boldly through the chill air, expressing the belief that, in spite of everything, America remains fundamentally good.



1. The Continental Congress voted in 1783 to erect an equestrian statue of Washington near the place where the obelisk now stands. No statue was erected and in 1833 the Washington Monument Society was formed. Construction began in 1848, after years of debates and delays, and stopped partway through in 1854. In 1876 (after the Civil War) Congress appropriated the funds to proceed, and the bare obelisk was completed in late 1884 (the dedication ceremony took place on 21 February 1885). The original design for the monument was, however, never fulfilled. For an exhaustive account of the Washington Monument, see F. L. Harvey's *History of the Washington National Monument and Washington National Monument Society* (Washington, D.C., 1903). I note that in 1783 the House voted to commemorate Washington with a mausoleum shaped as a pyramid rather than with the equestrian statue, but the bill did not pass the Senate. In 1836 a public design competition was sponsored by the Society; the one criterion was that the design should "harmoniously blend durability, simplicity, and grandeur" (pp. 25–26).

2. The one exception is James Smithson, who is buried in the Smithsonian Institution's "Castle." On the area denoted by the term "Washington Mall," see the beginning of section one below.

3. The Jefferson Memorial was dedicated in 1943; the Grant and Lincoln Memorials in 1922. The Capitol took on something like its present appearance with the reconstructions in the 1850s and 1860s; and the entire Mall area was not fully landscaped, cleared of extraneous buildings, and the streets named after presidents, until after World War II.

4. The notion of a "self-organizing whole" has not been terribly popular among philosophers, with weighty exceptions such as Aristotle and Hegel, thanks to the powerful attraction of the sort of unity a single *episteme* or *techné* promises. Consider Descartes' statement:

One of the first of the considerations that occurred to me was that there is very often less perfection in works composed of several portions, and carried out by the hands of various masters, than in those on which one individual alone has worked. Thus we see that buildings planned and carried out by one architect alone are usually more beautiful and better proportioned than those which many have tried to put in order and improve, making use of old walls which were built with other ends in view. In the same way also, those ancient cities which, originally mere villages, have become in the process of time great towns, are usually badly constructed in comparison with those which are regularly laid out on a plain by a surveyor who is free to follow his own ideas. Even though, considering their buildings each one apart, there is often as much or more display of skill in the one case than in the other, the former have large buildings and small buildings indiscriminately placed together, thus rendering the streets crooked and irregular, so that it might be said that it was chance rather than the will of men guided by reason that led to such an arrangement. And if we consider that this happens despite the fact that from all time there have been certain officials who have had the special duty of looking after the buildings of private individuals in order that they may be public ornaments, we shall understand how difficult it is to bring about much that is satisfactory in operating only upon the works of others. [*Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1972), 1:87–88]

Descartes goes on to make the same point with respect to religion, laws, morals, science and the accumulation of knowledge, and finally his own search for "secure foundations."

5. For a thorough discussion of the Pantheon and later imitations (as well as earlier precedents) see William L. MacDonald, *The Pantheon: Design, Meaning, and Progeny* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976).

6. James M. Goode notes that the statue was originally crowned by a Liberty Cap worn in Rome by freed slaves, but that this "was changed after objections by then Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, who asserted that the headdress embodied a not-very-subtle Yankee

protest against slavery" (*The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C.* [Washington, D.C., 1974], p. 60). The issue of individual freedom is very much at stake in the statue's symbolism.

7. See Garry Wills, "Washington's Citizen Virtue: Greenough and Houdon," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (Mar. 1984): 420–41. Wills remarks that "Greenough took for his model what the neoclassical period believed was the greatest statue ever created, by the greatest sculptor who ever lived—the Elean *Zeus* of Phidias" (p. 420). For a fascinating discussion of eighteenth-century portraiture of Washington, see Wendy Wick's *George Washington, an American Icon: The Eighteenth-Century Graphic Portraits* (Charlottesville, Va., 1982). The prints reproduced on pp. 139, 141, and 142, in which Washington's death is lamented, contain representations of obelisks. In her introduction to the volume, L. B. Miller points out how quickly and extensively Washington became a national icon. He was frequently compared to Roman heroes, "whom Washington himself so much admired" (p. xiv). Washington's honesty, simplicity, love of agrarian pursuits, prudence, restraint, reasonableness, lack of ambition, military abilities, and strength made him seem the perfect embodiment of Roman Republican virtues. I add that the fact that the memorial to Washington is Egyptian also reflects the fact that he was a Mason (the Masons were very much involved in the selection of the monument's design and in the dedication). Consider too the pyramid on the one dollar bill.

8. For an interesting distinction between three kinds of symbolism in architecture, namely, (1) that in which the structure's symbolism is not a means to anything else (as in obelisks), (2) that in which the outside structure is a means to a further symbol enclosed within (as in classical architecture), and (3) that in which the outside structure has its own inherent symbolism but is also a means (as in Romantic architecture), see Hegel's *Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1974), vol. 2, pt. 3, sec. 1 ("Architecture").

9. In his lengthy oration delivered during the formal ceremonies held at the Capitol in connection with the dedication of the Washington Monument, the Honorable Robert C. Winthrop took note of the absence of the customary writing on the side of the obelisk. He suggested that "no mystic figures or hieroglyphical signs" and "no such vainglorious words as 'Conqueror,' or 'Chastiser of Foreign Nations,' nor any such haughty assumption or heathen ascription as 'Child of the Sun'" are appropriate to the Washington Monument. Those who look at the memorial will be reminded of Washington's own "masterly words," the understanding of which "requires no learning of scholars, no lore of Egypt, nothing but love of our own land" (*The Dedication of the Washington National Monument with the Orations* [Washington, D.C., 1885], p. 61). Winthrop also suggests that the composition of a single massive structure out of many individual blocks (in contrast with the Egyptian obelisks which were monoliths) symbolizes "our cherished National motto, E PLURIBUS UNUM" (p. 52). Further, the memorial rises above the city as Washington "rose above sectional prejudices and party politics and personal interests." The memorial's height shows that Washington's name and example are more exalted than any other in American history, like a bright star and guiding light "for all men and for all ages" (pp. 53–54).

10. I am indebted to the independent art historian Francis V. O'Connor for ideas concerning the symbolic content of the four directions. These ideas have proved valuable in interpreting the environmental iconography of the various public monuments discussed in this essay. Dr. O'Connor's theory of directional symbolism is developed in "An Iconographic Interpretation of Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry Murals* in Terms of Their Orientation to the Cardinal Points of the Compass," published in the exhibition catalog *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* (New York, 1986), pp. 215–29. The ancient and intimate connection between the founding of a town or city in accordance with a conception of the order of the universe is documented in Joseph Rykwert's *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy, and the Ancient World* (Princeton, N.J., 1976). Rykwert comments:

The rite of the founding of a town touches on one of the great commonplaces of religious experience. The construction of any human dwelling or communal building is in some sense always an *anamnesis*, the recalling of a divine 'instituting' of a centre

of the world. That is why the place on which it is built cannot arbitrarily or even 'rationally' be chosen by the builders, it must be 'discovered' through the revelation of some divine agency. And once it has been discovered, the permanence of revelation in that place must be assured. The mythical hero or deity attains the centre of the universe or the top of the cosmic mountain by overcoming epic obstacles. The ordinary mortal may find this place anagogically through the agency of ritual. In the case I am considering, through the ritual of orientation. [P. 90]

In the final paragraph of the book, Rykwert also notes that

It is difficult to imagine a situation when the formal order of the universe could be reduced to a diagram of two intersecting co-ordinates in one plane. Yet this is exactly what did happen in antiquity: the Roman who walked along the *cardo* knew that his walk was the axis round which the sun turned, and that if he followed the *decumanus*, he was following the sun's course. The whole universe and its meaning could be spelt out of his civic institutions—so he was at home in it. We have lost all the beautiful certainty about the way the world works. [P. 202]

I am arguing that the organization of the heart of the city named after the quasi-mythical hero Washington exhibits a complex unity on the symbolic level, a unity tied to ancient perceptions of the cosmos' order. I do not, however, claim that this unity is the product of conscious design.

11. See Goode, *Outdoor Sculpture*, p. 27.

12. See MacDonald, who adds that "the idea of circularity in monumental architecture descended chiefly from two sources, religious buildings and tombs. . . . The tradition of roundness was very strongly entrenched in funerary architecture" (*The Pantheon*, pp. 44, 45).

13. The adaptability of a Roman design to Jefferson's New World is not as odd as it seems. Consider MacDonald's perceptive reflection that

Symbolically and ideologically the Pantheon idea survived because it describes satisfactorily, in architectural form, something close to the core of human needs and aspirations. By abstracting the shape of the earth and the imagined form of the cosmos into a grand, immediately assimilated image, the architect of the Pantheon gave mankind a symbol that transcends religion, class, and political conviction. In contrast to Gothic architecture, for example, the Pantheon's religious associations are ambiguous, if they exist at all. Because it was not freighted with any sectarian or localized meaning, and because of the universality inherent in its forms, it was unendingly adaptable. It is one of the very few archetypal images in western architecture.

The theme [of the Pantheon], of course, was unity—the unity of gods and state, of people and state, and the unity of the perpetual existence and function of the state with the never-ending revolutions of the planetary clockwork. The grid underfoot, in appearance like the Roman surveyor's plan for a town, appeared overhead in the coffering, up in the zone of the mysteries of the heavens. To unify unities is to produce the universal, and this is perhaps the Pantheon's ultimate meaning. [*The Pantheon*, pp. 132, 88]

One need only substitute "society" for "state" here to bring the point close to the Jeffersonian outlook.

14. This contrast between classical and Gothic architecture is made by Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 686.

15. I note in passing that Jefferson designed his own grave marker, a six-foot-high obelisk placed on a three-foot-square base.

16. Consider, by contrast, Gilbert Stuart's famous "Atheneum" portrait of the unsmiling Washington (1796).

17. The designer is Maya Lin, who at the time was a twenty-one-year-old student at Yale University (the designer of the Grant Memorial too was young and unknown). Lin

is quoted as saying that she intended the memorial "to bring out in people the realization of loss and a cathartic healing process" (*U.S. News and World Report* [21 Nov. 1983], p. 68). In her statement submitted as part of the design competition, Lin wrote, "Brought to a sharp awareness of such a loss, it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss. For death is in the end a personal and private matter and the area contained within this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning" ("Design Competition: Winning Designer's Statement," reproduced by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Inc.)

18. The memorial to Einstein is directly north of the VVM (indeed, the VVM almost points directly to it) just across the street and next to the National Academy of Sciences. On the border of the nation's memorials lies a reminder of the critical role of science in shaping our past. The connection between the Vietnam War and the products of science is especially intimate. And the nuclear weaponry that science and Einstein produced have, of course, huge consequences for the nation's future. Given Einstein's efforts to find a cure for the disease of war, his proximity to the Mall and its memorials is all the more symbolic.

19. Access to the monument is provided by a path running its length, the grassy area in front being roped off for now to preserve it from the crowds of people who continually visit the Memorial.

20. The seemingly neutral status of the Memorial was dictated by the criteria set down for the design competition. The criteria were that the monument (1) be reflective and contemplative in character, (2) be harmonious with its site and surroundings, (3) provide for the inscription of the names of the nearly 58,000 who gave their lives or remain missing, (4) make no political statement about the war, and (5) occupy up to two acres of land. Most objections to the VVM are thus objections to the criteria for the competition. I am suggesting that Lin's design fulfills these criteria in a way that responds to those objections. The design competition was open to all United States citizens over eighteen years of age. The jury of seven internationally known architects and one writer/design critic was selected by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. A total of 1,421 entries were submitted to the competition. They were judged anonymously (identified to the jurors only by number). After deliberating, the jury unanimously recommended Lin's design to the eight directors of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, who in turn accepted the nomination unanimously. The proposal then had to go through the lengthy federal approval process. After a rancorous and heated debate between supporters and opponents of the design, it was finally agreed to add a sculpture of three servicemen and a flagpole to the memorial site, so that the heroism of the veterans and the nobility of their cause might be more palpably, and traditionally, represented. These additions are now in place. I shall discuss them briefly below. The VVM was constructed entirely with private contributions.

21. Lin is quoted in R. Campbell's "An Emotive Place Apart" as saying that "I thought about what death is, what a loss is . . . a sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on the site. Take a knife and cut open the earth, and with time the grass would heal it. As if you cut open the rock and polished it" (*American Institute of Architects Journal* 72 [May 1983], p. 151).

22. Thus my interpretation of the VVM differs from that of William Hubbard, "A Meaning for Monuments," *Public Interest* 74 (Winter 1984): 17-30. Hubbard does not take into account the therapeutic potential of this memorial. His criticism of the VVM culminates in the following:

Little wonder, then, that the sheer emotional impact of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial satisfies us. Not having the idea that artworks can provide guidance in human dilemmas, we do not sense the absence of such guidance here. We take from the monument not a resolution of our conflicting emotions over the war, but an intensified, vivified version of those emotions. [P. 27]

Yet, as I have argued, the Memorial does not just demand emotion, it demands that emotion

be checked by reflection guided by the symbolism of the VVM (symbolism partially sustained by the VVM's relationship to the rest of the Mall). The Memorial is interrogative in the way that Hubbard himself suggests all memorials should be (p. 28). His failure to consider the complex symbolism of the VVM leads him to erroneously assimilate the VVM to modernist architecture whose purpose is not to be *about* something in the world so much as to *be* a thing in the world (p. 26).