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**UNDERWHELMED**

# Casualties of War

By **Sandy Asirvatham** | Posted **11/29/2000**

Maya Lin, designer of the once-controversial Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, published a fascinating piece in the Nov. 2 issue of *The New York Review of Books*--an essay she wrote in late 1982, just as the memorial was being completed, then put away for 18 years. To read it now is to remember both how visionary this Yale grad student was when she designed the memorial for a class on funereal architecture. Lin had been studying war memorials throughout history and writes about how most of them "carried larger, more general messages about a leader's victory or accomplishments rather than the lives lost. In fact, at the national level, individual lives were very seldom dealt with, until you arrived at the memorials for World War I."

In the aftermath of that conflict, memorials began to reflect the immense loss of life by listing those who'd been killed or were missing in action. Lin spent time meditating on the emotional power of the individual name, on its ability to "bring back every single memory you have of that person" in a far more comprehensive way than a photograph or a generalized image. In deciding to make the 57,000 names of missing and killed soldiers central to her design, Lin anticipated a requirement of the national Vietnam memorial design competition, a requirement she only learned about weeks later.

She eventually traveled to D.C. to look at the prospective memorial site. There on the Mall, she writes, "I had a simple impulse to cut into the earth. I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the initial cut would remain a pure flat surface in the earth with a polished, mirrored surface. . . . The need for the names to be on the memorial would become the memorial; there was no need to embellish the design further. The people and their names would allow everyone to respond and remember."

Architecture students generally enter such contests as exercises only, so Lin was shocked when her design won out over more than 1,400 entries. Given the nature of Washington, she was again shocked that the project actually got approved, funded, and built. There were plenty of detractors: Some considered the polished black granite "too feminine" and blasted the work as "a black gash of shame and sorrow." Ross Perot tried to persuade the memorial committee that veterans "would prefer a parade instead, something happy or uplifting."

"I can remember thinking that a parade would not in the long term help them to overcome the enormous trauma of the politics of that war," Lin writes. "I do not think I fully realized until the dedication and homecoming parade that the veterans needed both. . . . In November 1982, I was in tears watching these men welcoming themselves home after almost 10 years of not being acknowledged by their country for their service, their sacrifice."

Reading these words, I remembered my first visit to the memorial 15 years ago. It was the only time I'd ever been truly moved by a war monument. In part, I was responding to a genuinely affecting piece of architecture: As I descended the path and the wall of names grew ever taller, I felt engulfed by the sheer number of human lives lost. But the truly gripping aspect of the experience for me had to do with the constant presence of living veterans at the site, some of them visibly scarred or maimed, looking for buddies' names on the mirrored black surface, crying, leaving flowers and photographs.

Thinking back on those still-living casualties of war, I start to wonder whether memorials should be reserved for the dead alone. Maybe instead we should build monuments listing all the names of the men and women who served, sacrificed, and came back alive but irreparably changed.

Consider the experiences of John Averella, the postmaster of Arnold, Md., and past president of the Baltimore chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of Maryland. Like many Vietnam vets, Averella (Army 173rd Airborne Brigade,




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1970-'71) was so consumed by guilt and pain after the war that he buried the experience. When the national memorial was dedicated, he says, "I don't even think it had entered my mind to go see it. I think I went off and played golf that day. It was like I was never a veteran." Averella's reticence was so deep that he managed to get married in 1981 and then divorced a couple of years later without ever telling his wife he'd served. In 1989, after playing a role in the dedication of Maryland's own Vietnam memorial, Averella started experiencing the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. It was just the beginning of his healing process. Such is the power of our ability to suppress pain, and the power of memorials to release it.

If you have any connection at all to this part of our recent history, I'd encourage you to visit the Maryland memorial, located off Hanover Street next to Harbor Hospital. Its design is simple: a circle of grass with a boundary of wedge-shaped panels of polished black granite, into which are carved the names of the 1,046 Maryland soldiers lost in Vietnam. Despite being surrounded by roads, cars, and harbor traffic, it's a still, quiet place.

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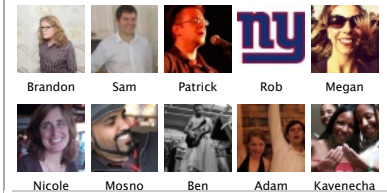
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