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Death, War, and Public Memory: Iwo Jima, Vietnam, and the Wild West

by M. M. Lovell
University of California at Berkeley

Our task is to address the relationship between “the ‘people,’ the ‘popular’ and the ‘public.’”[1] I will do so by considering monuments. Recently we witnessed the dedication of the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., a choreographed spectacle in which a complicated iconographic program was explicated, newsreel footage recapitulated a heroic conflict between the forces of Good and Evil, G. I. veteran octogenarians told war stories, and popular entertainers (movie stars, country and western singers) gave the whole static sculpture sound, light, and movement. It was a public event on public land, telecast nationally, probably globally. What was *really* going on? Was it a cloaked call to arms in Iraq? Was it a tidy upbeat dignified political response to the messy undignified tragic business of 9/11? Was it an expression of generation-envy by belated politician would-be warriors? Is it a “successful” monument? In what ways can the World War II memorial, or ANY artwork trigger, capture, and direct personal memory and public meaning?

I am not going to offer a sustained critique of that particular monument—I note that its architect, Friedrich St. Florian, lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and I am on alien turf. However I note that *another* critic has said that it is the “purest banality,—an inert plaza dressed with off-the-shelf symbols of grief and glory.” St. Florian’s response to that sort of critique is recorded as: “The controversy will die away, as it has with all the great memorials in

[1] This is the oral version of a paper that will be published in longer form, with citations, in the future.

Washington." He is alluding in this comment, of course, to the controversy two decades ago surrounding the design of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial which will be the focus of my attention in this paper.

What makes monuments "great" or "banal"? What are the vocabularies that speak to Grief or Glory in public space? What, in fact is a monument's job? On the most basic level, a monument, a commemorative public architectural sculpture, is an aesthetic thing: it triggers personal memory; it catches the eye, the curiosity, and, if it's good, the soul. Where personal memory gives out, its second job is to create a synthetic memory, that is, to educate.

Maya Lin's "The Women's Table," for instance, is a serene granite slab that commemorates the education of women at Yale University. Erected in 1993, the twentieth anniversary of the graduation of the first women undergraduates from that institution, it is an understated water-washed chronicle of female enrollments that one reads, hears, and experiences visually and kinesthetically. Characteristic of public art, it instructs newcomers, and reminds the old guard, about the past.

The past casts a shadow over the present—whether ominous, benign, celebratory, or cautionary. But the past is unstable; its meaning, its dimensions and hierarchies need to be fixed and re-fixed. This need is social and political. Monuments help because they face hard facts—like the exclusion of women or the death of soldiers—but then they soundbite those facts, providing a safe and orderly place for strong emotions to surface but remain orderly, polite. This paper evolved out of my musings on the difference between private memory and public memory, and on the role of art in constructing memory. Public sculpture and photojournalism allow us to remember events we never witnessed. They allow us to find meaning in events that come precariously close to meaninglessness.

Public memorials usually differ in *scale* (they are bigger) and in *subject* from objects made for or commissioned by private individuals, and even for most municipal institutions like art museums and parks. In public art, Europeans and European-derived cultures (and this is probably true elsewhere but I cannot speak to that) frequently tell stories about cultural foundations: where do "we" come from; what in the past is worthy of our regard and imitation? What constitutes virtuous and valorous action for us? Who, in other words, *are* "we"? Because of their role in religious and historic life, in telling tales central to the culture, these artworks have occupied a privileged, elite position in the hierarchy of artistic genres and in public life. It was an accepted fact well into the nineteenth century that history painting and architectural sculpture commissioned for public buildings and for erection on public land were intrinsically more important than portraiture, landscape painting, genre painting, or still life, or than sculpture intended for the domestic sphere.

In America and in the twentieth century the status and business of public art became trickier; the question of just who "we" are and what kind of consensus we can assume about virtuous behavior and valorous action is much more vexed. Why, in the first place, is this job delegated to art, to monuments? The answer is, of course that it often is not: these codes are written (if in negatives) in our law books, in our high school civics texts, in the editorial columns of our newspapers, and many other places, but they are frequently most concisely and powerfully expressed, or called into question, in public art. Public art matters because it encapsulates *public memory*, a very special kind of memory, and it does so in a very special kind of shorthand language. In public monuments meaningful distillation of complex and consequential (and often contested) issues is usually understood to be the primary criterion for success.

No one was alive who had personally known Washington when the national monument to his memory was completed and dedicated in 1888. Planning for it had begun within months, in fact, within hours of his death almost a century before in 1799, but its construction was delayed decade after decade, not just because of a lack of funds but principally because getting a consensus of Americans to agree about *how* to remember George Washington (and he was a virtually uncontroversial figure) was almost insurmountable. This "how" points to the issue of design. More than a hundred designs were proposed, budgeted, even partially built before the project was turned over to Robert Mills, an engineer who executed the stark, reverential obelisk that today punctuates the skyline of the capital city. An unadorned geometric shaft of stone, this obelisk points to ancient forms, forms associated with Egypt and memory, and death that is arrestable, or at least death that defies decay. These are the elements of public memory: *death* (especially meaningful death) and *eternal life* of a figurative if not a literal sort, and lastly, *education*. Education figures prominently because those gathered around Washington's deathbed and citizens throughout the country desired his memory live on beyond their personal anecdotal memory of his deeds and virtues. Public memory, in other word, kicks in when personal memory seems insufficient, and the person or event commemorated is of public consequence, is the subject of emulation and tales foundational to a national sense of unity. When I say *tales* I do not mean to imply these narratives of public memory are untrue, only that they are the result of construction, selection, and emphasis.

The stakes in cultural memory are much higher than in personal memory because these are the tales people tell themselves, each other, and their successors to make sense of their corporate experience, a much more tenuous and complex thing than individual history and individual memory. The Robert Shaw Memorial on the Boston Common by Augustus St.

Gaudens (1884-97) exhibits the dominant sculptural mode for public monuments in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries: figural cast bronze. Formed in a mold in a molten state, bronze has the capacity to show great detail (far more, for instance, than marble), capturing clothing and texture and details of physiognomy with extraordinary immediacy. Bronze also has extraordinary longevity, beyond that of marble when exposed to the elements. Permanence and specificity of detail are bronze's material and technical virtues. In 1880, then, the two competing possibilities for medium and type in public memorials were stone abstraction like the Washington monument, and bronze figurative particularity like the Shaw Memorial. These remained the two competing possibilities for medium and type into the late twentieth century and my comments today will address the nature of this competition and the social values ascribed to each.

The man who first conceived of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial (1981-82) was Jan Scruggs, an ordinary infantry volunteer, who awoke one night in March 1979 to realize he could not remember the *names* of all his fallen buddies from Vietnam. The monument he imagined, then, first and foremost, was to function as an *aide-memoire*: its job was to freeze and assist the memory of comrades. It was also to instruct those who never knew the *what* and *who* of this traumatic national event. The monument was conceived in his imagination as a 30-foot black obelisk like a small, dark version of the Washington monument—on the surface of which all the names would be carved, names because they are, in our culture, a shorthand sign of individual identity. Jan Scruggs conceived a monument designed to remember the 57,611 soldiers killed or missing and to avoid politics concerning this most divisive and longest (1959-1975) of all American wars.

The completed Vietnam Veteran's Memorial points with one long black arm to the Washington monument and it gestures in the other direction to the Lincoln Memorial. The 20-year-old designer, Maya Lin, submitted one of 1,421 entries to the competition Scruggs's committee initiated; in fact she did not have much choice in the matter—her professor decided the competition would make a good course assignment. She was an undergraduate at Yale at the time. The committee judging the designs did so "blind," that is, they did not have the names or resumes of the candidates; they just had the projects. It is doubtful that her design would have won had the politics of her being a woman, Asian, and a college student intruded before the decision was made.

Like architecture and unlike many other artworks, the making of monuments is a collaborative enterprise. The execution of the design involved engineers, craftsmen, and bulldozer drivers. The Vietnam Memorial also involved the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Committee (which laid out the competition rules and raised the funds), the selection committee, the senate committee that hassled over the question of site, and the millions of veterans, widows, parents, and friends who gave $8 million in small donations to see that the project was realized.

Remembering war is never just a veteran's issue. War "over there" (however distant "over there" is) is also catastrophe at home: soldiers, who are brothers, fathers, and sometimes sisters, die or are wounded or maimed. How does one remember these things? These things time two hundred thousand? How does one teach others to remember them? Maya Lin figured it out. Lin's memorial is geometrically precise, non-figurative and abstract. In that it seems to have much in common with both the Washington Monument to which it points, and mid-century modernism in architecture and design: Meisian modernism made into an excavated wedge. Her design has certain formal qualities to handle the irregularity of individual names within the sameness of

non-human geometries: typographically, the list is ragged left on the left side and ragged right on the right.

Lin’s design turns its back on many of the visual rhetorics used in dealing with death in America, such formats as the arched-topped tablet shape of typical eighteenth-century headstones, and such visual shorthands as the winged skull or crossbones that often crown the text rectangle on such personal memorials with their admonitions “when this you see, remember me.” What she did preserve from this long familiar rhetorical toolbox was the Roman serephed lettering system and the black stone (Lin's shiny marble is elegant but not permanent—marble is much softer than the slate of colonial headstones).

Maya Lin's wall, like eighteenth-century gravemarkers, is about human time and eternal time, personal memory and community memory. It is a thing but it is also a place with an aura, a tradition, like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. It profoundly touches individual and corporate grief. It is an aesthetic success, a critical success, and a popular success. *Why then was this design controversial?* Why, when the winning design was announced, was there a firestorm of criticism along these lines (this is from a newspaper editorial, 1981):

> [There is] no mention of Vietnam, war, duty, country, sacrifice, courage, or even tragedy. This memorial says one thing: only the dead, nothing besides, remain […] It is an unfortunate choice of memorial. Memorials are built to give context and, possibly, meaning to suffering that is otherwise incomprehensible. We do not memorialize bus accidents, which by nature are contextless, meaningless. To treat the Vietnam dead like the victims of some monstrous traffic accident is more than a disservice to history; it is a disservice to the memory of the 57,000. It is an act of arrogance for us to assign them the status of victims, nothing but victims.

This editorial focuses on the absence of rhetorics of motive and consolation: the familiar language of "duty, country, sacrifice, courage." What did they think would be right and why? Some wanted little temples, one wanted a building-sized military helmet. Most, it seems wanted and expected something like Robert Summers, *John Wayne, American Legend*, of 1982 (Orange County Airport), something congruent with words like "courage" and "hero," something, frankly, that was consistent with mid-century models of masculinity. They wanted something concrete and real and figurative, something in bronze with all that specificity of detail bronze does so well, something that can make your spine tingle like Ella Fitzgerald singing "Oh Say Can You See by the Dawn's Early Light." What Maya Lin's design conjured up instead was the cool, distant, abstract, and, if truth be told, *elite* forms of mid-century abstraction with its earnestness; its silent, non-referential existential angst; and its aesthetic, which is frankly either irrelevant or emperor's-new-clothesish to most Americans. It seemed to have the air of Mark Rothko's black-on-black canvases, like *Triptych* at the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas: spiritually moving perhaps to some, but certainly perplexing to most Americans.

High-end mid-century American painting and sculpture did begin to include the human figure after 1960 as in the work of Duane Hanson, but usually only with a wry smile, a chuckling, self-subverting post-modern realism, never invoking words like "courage" and "hero." But in popular culture, in the vernacular, the human figure and realism survived as a strong (unironic) aesthetic completely outside the twentieth-century march to abstraction in the Madison Avenue galleries of New York City. In Guten Borglum's *Mount Rushmore* of 1927-41, and Felix de Weldon's *Marine Corps War Memorial* of 1954, in Arlington Cemetery outside Washington, D. C.—here, Americans felt, was the appropriate shorthand of history: the great

leaders and the footsoldiers of history heroically figured for our popular memory and future role models. Here were two ways of being real men.

Particularly strong was the precedent of the Iwo Jima monument. Let us look for a moment at how the Iwo Jima monument achieved its iconic status as *the* appropriate way to memorialize war, sacrifice, and heroicism, and exactly how the moment it memorializes became installed in the national memory as *the* event of World War II. To understand it one needs to reflect on the role of photojournalism in our culture. On Iwo Jima, on this tiny Pacific island in the closing months of the Second World War when the Japanese were tenaciously fighting for every foothold, the Marines landed and, characteristically, a news photographer, Joe Rosenthal, landed with them. What he saw and photographed was the beach with its usual dead and dying, and, after the battle, troops standing around as a U. S. flag was planted—as the U.S claimed and with this flag symbolically "liberated" this territory—certainly none of his initial images has iconic power. As the flag-raising was taking place and being photographed, some Japanese soldiers emerged from an underground bunker and a skirmish occurred. It was decided that the flag, which had tumbled in the fracas, needed to be reinstalled and Rosenthal apparently assisted in the choreography of this event, getting a much more dramatic, active, cooperative, manly, image which appeared on all the wire services, and in *Life* magazine. Rosenthal's photo of the second flag-raising was put on stamps, and the 1946 Rose Bowl parade included a float with this tableau in roses. With such an image, I would propose, war and triumph in the Pacific in particular, were pictured as human and heroic, deflecting the alternative models of mechanized warfare and fusion bombs more to the point. Even more exposure occurred in the vastly popular medium of film when, in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1945), Rosenthal's photo was reanimated and contextualized into a tale of heroic action starring, and introducing to the American public, John

Wayne. Wayne, of course, went on to a career in cowboy films about white-hat heroes, black-hat evil-doers, and sixguns righting wrongs.

Rosenthal's choreographed image was fixed in bronze by Felix de Weldon on immense scale at Arlington (ancestral home of Robert E. Lee, taken over by the nation during the Civil War as burial ground for Union soldiers), just outside Washington; the monument was dedicated November 10, 1954. This sculpture presides over the burial ground at Arlington where military casualties and presidents are buried, and rhetorically rehearses words like "duty, honor, courage" and, especially, "hero."

A smaller limestone version was installed at the entrance to Quantico, a Marine base in northern Virginia where it has been seen by generations of Marines, and invoked by every commanding officer. The power of this image is constantly reinvoked on occasions like the 4th of July, occasions on which words like "patriotism," "liberty," "freedom," and "heroicism" circulate. The image has sufficient power and familiarity that cartoonists invoke it both in reverence for the common man (as in Beatle Bailey, 1998), and in jest (as in Clinton's health plan position); it is the iconic heroic effort of teamwork. Pictorial editors and cartoonists can count on public memory of this image and on its resonance with words like "war" and "victory" in order to make their point succinctly about a victory over drugs or over a faltering economy. It has the power and recognizability of a folk saying, a ballad, a flag. The 50-year public life of Rosenthal's image is an index of the power of photojournalism in our visual culture, and the status of the Second World War as a formative event in our national culture.

The photojournalism that came out of the Vietnam war, on the other hand was very different, and tended to look like Eddie Adams' *Execution in Saigon Street* (1968), or Nick Ut's memorable image of a child, *Fleeing Napalm Bomb Attack, Vietnam* (1972)—images that sear

themselves on one's memory but not images that invoke words like “heroicism,” “courage,” or “model masculinity.” Vietnam, for Americans, seemed to call those very words into question: guns blazing, yes, but no John Wayne.

In 1984, two years after Maya Lin's monument was dedicated, a bronze figural statue with appropriately diverse figural types by Frederick Hart was planted near to Lin’s black marble wall in a grove of trees. The intent was to placate the diehard Iwo Jima-ists. It lacks the confidence of its predecessors. But it has all the detail and particularity of costume and facial features that bronze can give and that Americans had learned to admire in St. Gaudens’ *Shaw* memorial, Frederick Remington’s *Bronco Buster*, and Weldon's *Iwo Jima* monument. More recently, in 1994, a sculptural group designed by Glenna Goodacre figuring and commemorating the women (that is, the nurses) who served in Vietnam was also added, pointing up one of the problems of particularity—it seems to demand ever more precise categories rather than moving in the direction of distilled public memory.

The Iwo Jima strategy of memorializing death, disaster, tragedy by mobilizing a particular well-circulated image from photojournalism continues to be very much with us, and has a strong public following. In response to the Oklahoma City bombing of 1994, for instance, there was strong support for a bronze reenactment of the news photo of a firefighter cradling a dead child. The problem with war and disaster is that it produces so few images of victory, of heroicism, of human virtue, of buddies working together, but produces so many images from which we are moved to avert our eyes.

The curious thing about Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial is that it has achieved with its abstraction—ordinarily associated with the economic and cultural elite—the *commonality* and the emotional impact of the Iwo Jima photo, monument, film, Rose Bowl float,

and sculpture. It isn't that Lin has rendered the esoteric popular, it's that she has designed an artwork in which meaning matters to everyone. People interact with the wall: they leave little flags, boots, teddy bears; they touch the names; and they make rubbings of the names to take home. By definition, Maya Lin's is a project in *public memory*, not personal artistic expression, and because it is public memory, what it says (and how it says it) matters to each of us both individually and as a nation. In sum, I would say that the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial is a “success,” the new World War II monument is a failure; and the Iwo Jima-John Wayne monument tells the wrong story.