

# **The Memory Behind the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.**

Unai Valbuena Mesa

History Degree

Virginia López de Maturana

Academic Year 2021/2022

Contemporary History Department

## **Abstract**

This work aims to study the memory of one of the most challenging wars in the recent history of the United States of America through the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Vietnam was not like other wars. It divided the US society like never before in the last century and showed an image of the USA that did not match the promised American values. For the first time televisions covered all the details of the nature of the war committed by the land of the free and the home of the brave. Besides, people's anger broke up in form of the largest social protest ever seen. For those reasons, from the very beginning the memorialization of Vietnam was a delicate matter which was not exempt from polemic and incorporations. Praised by some and demonized by others, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial caused several reactions all over the US society. Therefore, this work will also focus on the answer given by four social sectors.

Firstly, the Vietnam veterans, who after a long path claiming to be recognized, felt grateful to have a meaningful space in the heart of the nation to assimilate the war trauma. Secondly, this paper will continue by highlighting how the widows of the dead soldiers in Vietnam found peace in facing the lost through the memorial's unique atmosphere. Thirdly, the undervaluing representation of women who served in favour of the USA in Vietnam and their attempt to be remembered. Fourthly, it will be discussed the irrelevancy the Vietnam Veterans Memorial meant for the African American veterans and the reasons behind it, regardless of their greater involvement in the war. Eventually, this work will be ended with a conclusion where the importance of memory will be highlighted.

In order to offer the most accurate and closest approach, this study is based on a diverse list of sources. For instance, books and scientific articles have been crucial to provide an objective historical background as well as the latest conclusions. Besides, written and oral testimonies have been used as a direct source of information. In the same way, this research would not be completed without the analysis of pop culture elements such as movies, literature or music. Finally, the opinion provided by the contemporary press has likewise been checked and determinant for this paper.

**Keywords:** Vietnam Veterans Memorial, The Wall, Memory, Monument, Vietnam War, Veterans.

**Index**

Abstract..... 2

Introduction..... 4

The Vietnam War..... 5

The Building of the Memorial ..... 7

The Concerned Actors ..... 16

    Vietnam veterans ..... 16

    Veterans’ widows ..... 18

    Female veterans ..... 21

    African American veterans ..... 25

Conclusion ..... 29

Bibliography ..... 31

## **Introduction**

This work will examine how the image of the Vietnam War is addressed in form of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. as part of a healing element for the memory of a nation. Iraq, Libya or recently Afghanistan are, to cite some, places where the US military intervention has been highly questionable. These wars did not count with the full support of the international community and were hardly legitimate from an ethical viewpoint in light of the suffering of thousands of families. The atrocities committed by US servicemen under erased promises of democracy and freedom split public opinion up and polarized the US society. Such a delicate reality means a difficulty to remember, yet a necessity not to be forgotten at the same time due to its profound impact. The way those events should be represented in every people's mind causes controversy. Actually, that might be the reason why currently it does not exist (and it seems like nothing will change for a while) an Iraq War Memorial or an Afghanistan War Monument in the capital city. But perhaps, in the search for national reconciliation, Vietnam Veterans Memorial would serve as an inspiration as it was conceived to heal the wounds left by a devastating conflict never experienced before.

The objective is to see whether a nation can left division aside and build a memorial where everyone is expected to fit in and feel part of a common history. That is to say, the purpose is to study if an architectural complex could create an enclave where individual and national healing is preserved. After all, that would mean the spatial coexistence of diverse memories that might be contradictories; but inevitably gathered due to the same irreparable loss. Not even to mention the possible intentioned political messages or, otherwise, the omission of them to manipulate public opinion.

As a way to accomplish that this paper will shortly introduce the Vietnam War and its relevance. Once the context is explained, it will be better understood the issues experienced in the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Furthermore, the memorial will be analysed from the perspective of Vietnam veterans, widows, female veterans and African American veterans. The selection of these concerned actors is the result of a careful research and they have been chosen due to their close implication in the Vietnam Era and the memorial. Lastly, this document expects to finish with a conclusion where the mentioned aspects will be referenced.

## **The Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War was a tragic conflict that marked a milestone in the history of the United States of America. It was preceded by the First Indochina War, which broke out in 1946. At that time, the Vietnamese leader Hồ Chí Minh (1946-1969) started a rebellion in the north of this Asian country to face French suppression. Meanwhile, the USA stayed out and took the event as a colonial war. Nevertheless, from 1949 on, Democrat President Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) and Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) changed that attitude by providing military and economic support to France, so did China with communist Vietnamese (Jones, 1996, p. 334).

The precarious ceasefire came with the Geneva Conference in 1954. The USA declined to sign it not to show subjugation, but reluctantly promised not to interfere. Despite that, the international community extensively recognised the independence of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Nonetheless, this last country would be half divided in the seventeenth parallel waiting for the reunification after the 1956 elections (Jones, 1996, p. 494). The failed national unity encouraged the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) to set up a faithful spy network all over the north and south. While the Southern Indigenist Catholic Conservative Government was severely repressing communist uprisings, the CPV started a violent campaign based on terrorist attacks (Westad, 2018, pp. 333-337).

Tensions eventually broke up when North Vietnam declared the war on the south in the delicate context of the 1960s. After all, the USSR was immersed itself in a de-Stalinization phase and aimed to compete with China (Westad, 2018, pp. 333-337), whereas the USA was not in a more favourable position due to dramatic struggles like the one of Cuba<sup>1</sup> (De la Guardia, 2019, p. 183).

Reasons like the aid provided by China and the USSR to the north, the ample social respect (almost veneration) to Ho Chi Minh and the unsuccessful national discourse in the south made unwise to attack Vietnam for numerous. Nevertheless, being pressured by the domino theory, Democrat John F. Kennedy's policy (1961-1963) was not so

---

<sup>1</sup> After the failed US invasion of the Bay of Pigs and as a way to save Fidel Castro's regime, the USSR planned to place Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962. President Kennedy was concerned about the threat it meant for the USA and its power over Latin America and therefore did little to decrease tensions. Consequently, the increasing US military power in the Caribbean Sea on October 23 and the attack against a US U-2 plane by a Soviet missile on October 27, showed that the world had never been so close to a nuclear fight. Finally, diplomacy led to an agreement where the USA promised not to invade Cuba and withdraw its missiles from Turkey if no Soviet missiles were left in Cuba (Westad, 2018, pp. 323-328).

different from Eisenhower's and sent advisers to support South Vietnam (Westad, 2018, pp. 334 and 337-338).

When it comes to the Democrat President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), he did not take a distant attitude towards Kennedy's foreign policy. Such a harsh attitude did not match with the liberal and progressive values of the American Way of Life, which was the base for the American Dream. Consequently, not only external, but also internal critics mushroomed and especially University students and black minorities marched more mobilised than ever all over the country (De la Guardia, 2019, p. 185). As a result of the snowballing opposition to war, on 21 March 1968 Johnson announced a ceasefire in the bombing of North Vietnamese territory and expressed his denial to be re-elected (Jones, 1996, p. 511). That did not only mean that the Vietnam War had destroyed Johnson's political aspirations but blotted his social reforms (Westad, 2018, pp. 355-356).

In the 1968 elections the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, was effortlessly considered to be a "peacemaker" in front of Hubert Humphrey. President Nixon (1969-1974) did not make specific guarantees on Vietnam but promised to end the conflict rapidly and honourably. That is the reason why he reached the presidency by setting up the Vietnamization policy. That is, while conversations for peace continued in Paris, Nixon meant to gradually retire the US forces and simultaneously reinforce the South Vietnamese Army. As a result of that policy, at the beginning of 1971 there were 275,000 fewer soldiers in Vietnam (half of the initial Army) and only 40,000 by September 1972 (Jones, 1996, pp. 511-512).

The ceasefire was a US defeat, yet was sold as an «honourable peace»<sup>2</sup>. At the end of the day, it stated the withdrawal of the US forces without defining a clear political future for Vietnam. It was just a matter of time before the weak South Vietnamese dictatorship would fall. And so he did when in April 1975 he recognised the unilateral surrender in favour of communists (Jones, 1996, pp. 515-516).

Overall the Vietnam War was the largest and one of the priciest fighting in the history of the USA. Especially, it cost 141,000 million dollars, firing inflation and forcing a massive cutback on vital social programmes. When it comes to casualties, nearly 58,000 US soldiers passed away during the war (Jones, 1996, pp. 515-516); whereas these numbers became larger on the Vietnamese side (Westad, 2018, p. 352). These kinds of

---

<sup>2</sup> Author's translation (Jones, 1996, p. 515).

acts made the USA the target of hard critics coming from both unfriendly and allied countries (Jones, 1996, p. 516).

In public, the three Vietnam-era presidents had determined expectations on America's victory and utterly undervalued popular movements. But every Head of State was truly aware that the Vietnam War was not easy to win. Nevertheless, no one wanted to be remembered as the president who gave Vietnam away and considered their actions admirable even till the last moment. That is how in the name of national prestige, thousands of human lives were sacrificed so as to avoid personal humiliation (Nye, 2020, p. 94).

### **The Building of the Memorial**

The social atmosphere left by the war fell rather delicate. The United States confronted an identity crisis in a moment when the concepts of heroism and patriotism were put into question. The end of the Vietnam War coincided with socially inspiring movements and the Watergate Scandal<sup>3</sup> (Hass, 1998, p. 7). Additionally, the assassination of promising leaders such as Martin Luther King or Robert Kennedy in 1968 and, mainly, the difficulty to assimilate the traumatic images of the war, were still in people's minds (Small, 1994, pp. 75-76). As a result of this, the events associated with Vietnam were severely silenced by public opinion, even before the conflict was officially concluded (Hass, 1998, p. 7). Precisely, speaking on behalf of the nation, Republican President Gerald Ford (1974-1977) insisted on "forgetting Vietnam" (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 80).

The war meant an intense rupture which was still alive between Americans. In light of the social shameful and distrustful feeling, no ceremonies were hosted to warmly receive the US troops. Actually, it was not even easy to talk about such a taboo issue<sup>4</sup> (Ochsner, 1997, p. 159). When the dead bodies of veterans came home, they were not shown by the mainstream media. On the contrary, they were buried with little recognition in private cemeteries or, in the best-case scenario, in Arlington National Cemetery, yet

---

<sup>3</sup> Although it was at first taken trivially and did not mean an issue for the re-election, The Watergate Scandal forced the resignation of President Nixon to avoid impeachment. The controversy began when in June 1972 five men were arrested with wiretapping gadgets to gather delicate information coming from Washington D.C.'s Watergate office building, the Democratic National Committee headquarters. That incident dismantled severe illegalities committed under the Republican administration and confirmed the relevance of the press and courts in silencing them. As a result, more than twenty individuals went to jail, including people close to Nixon and the proper Committee to Re-elect the President (Ritchie, 1998, pp. 49-50).

<sup>4</sup> In reference to the novel *In Country* "Dwayne had died with secrets. Emmet was walking with his. Anyone who survived Vietnam seemed to regard it as something personal and embarrassing" (Keskiner, 2000, p. 142).

under sealed and locked coffins. The deeply inserted denial of the American community to manifest any kind of emotion concerning the war, made the mourning uneasy. Nevertheless, the first attempts to break the forced silence or repression came in form of personal oral histories or private writings; among others, memories, memoirs poems or letters (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 80).

Besides, after a while, large productions began to deal with that matter through films like *The Deer Hunter* (1978, Michael Cimino) which embraced a mythical vision of the war. Later, other movies including *Rambo* (1982, Ted Kotcheff), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987, Stanley Kubrick) emphasized the humane essence of survival in a pointless war, instead of setting military victories (Small, 1994, pp. 76-77). Music industry followed the same trend and songs like *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984, Bruce Springsteen), which condemned the war and the hostile reception of Vietnam veterans, rapidly became an acclaimed anthem (Mackey-Kallis & Ian, 2008). Simultaneously, literature came up with new anti-war novels like *In Country* (1985, Bobby Ann Mason), which focuses on veterans' frustrations in the Deep South, a place where national obsession is larger than anywhere (Keskiner, 2000, p. 145).

Consequently, popular imaginary became aware of the human sacrifice, making for some people more evident the need to remember (Small, 1994, p. 76). That was for instance the case of the former Vietnam veteran Jan Scruggs. During a spring night in 1979, while watching the mentioned film *The Deer Hunter* and holding a glass of whiskey, he came up with an idea: a building in the capital city in which the names of the dead Vietnam veterans would be represented. That is how he settled the non-profit institution Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF). Then, it was just a matter of time to receive the necessary social and institutional acceptance in order to build the memorial (Carney, 1993, p. 213).

Actually, to turn Washington's politicians on their side, the VVMF proposed that no project would be passed if it did not have the support of the US Department of the Interior, the Fine Arts Commission and the National Capitol Planning Commission. Just a year after Jan Scruggs's idea, in April 1980 the Senate unanimously authorized the bill and by summer Democrat President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) confirmed that



compromise. Lately, it was agreed to celebrate a competition to pick the most appropriate proposal. Precisely, a professional jury<sup>5</sup> would have the final say (Carney, 1993, p. 213).

Every submitted had to meet certain requirements: to express gratitude and respect, to symbolize national unity, to be reflexive and contemplative without altering the environment, to provide easy access by wheelchair for the wounded soldiers... And fundamentally it would be unacceptable any sign of criticism or triumphalism concerning the war. After all, Vietnam was not like other conflicts and it deserved to be remembered in an apolitical and conciliatory way. In May 1981 the jury announced the final decision. Among 1,420 candidatures, the largest ever registered in a design competition and meaning that there were 1,420 different visions to memorialize the war, the number 1,026 was unanimously the chosen one (Vicente, 2007, pp. 4-5).

Maya Lin's design fulfilled all the suggestions. After all, it was an abstract work, based on two walls aligned between them (that is why people usually refer to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as "the Wall"). Actually, as it was expected, the lack of complex details did not let the formation of political messages. In addition to that, the project was thought to cover two acres of Washington D.C.'s National Mall (Hill, 2017, p. 142).

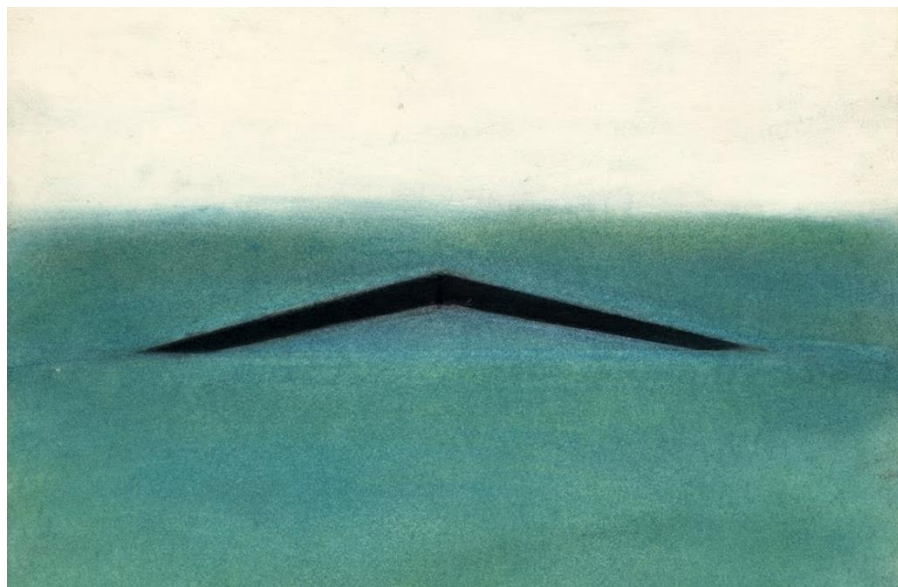


Image 1: The first sketch presented by Maya Lin to the jury in 1981 (Vicente, 2007, p. 4).

---

<sup>5</sup> It was formed by the architects Pietro Belluschi and Harry M. Weese; the landscape architects Garrett Eckbo and Hideo Sasaki; the sculptors Richard Hunt, Constantino Nivola and James Rosati and the editor of *Landscape Architecture* Grady Clay. Additionally, Paul D. Spreirengen worked as an experienced adviser (Vicente, 2007, p. 19, note 13).

Fortunately, not only did Maya's plan adjust to that size, but it was also successfully integrated into the Constitution Gardens of the Mall. Moreover, the monument might be so significantly invisible from a certain distance, that visitors find it almost by accident. That can be explained since the walls were built from the top to the bottom and, unlike other vertical memorials, such as Jefferson Memorial, Maya highlighted the horizontality. In other words, the user is encouraged to take a stepless way which gradually becomes deeper until he reaches the centre. At that inflexion point, the path is no longer descendent and the inclination changes to an ascendant way, till it gets aligned at the same level with the surrounding ground (Griswold & Griswold, 1986, pp. 706-708).

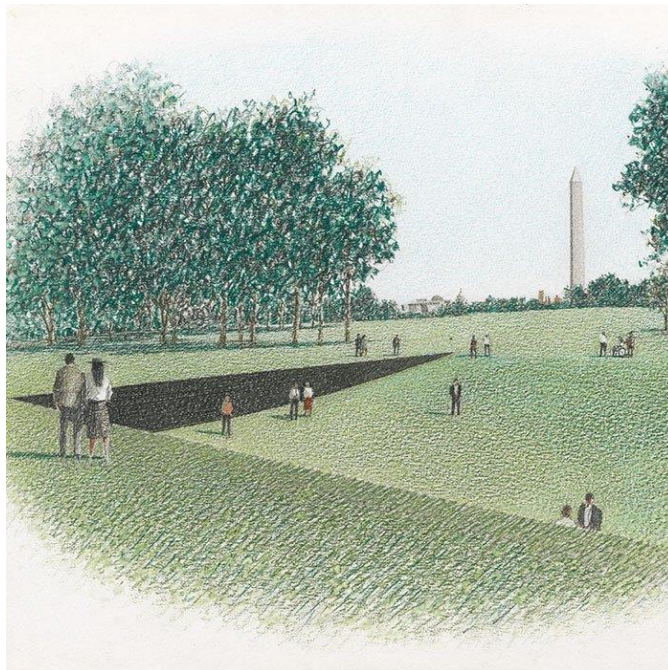


Image 2: The first sketch presented by Maya Lin to the press in 1981 (Vicente, 2007, p. 5).

Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that the fact of going down does not feel like descending into a tomb. Just on the contrary, the visiting person is far from being tight to the ground as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) does not limit the upper space. That is, the sky openly accompanies the guest through the whole route by softening a tomblike feeling. Moreover, that idea becomes stronger considering that the memorial is south-oriented, the direction of warmth and life, and it catches the maximum sunlight (Griswold & Griswold, 1986, p. 706).

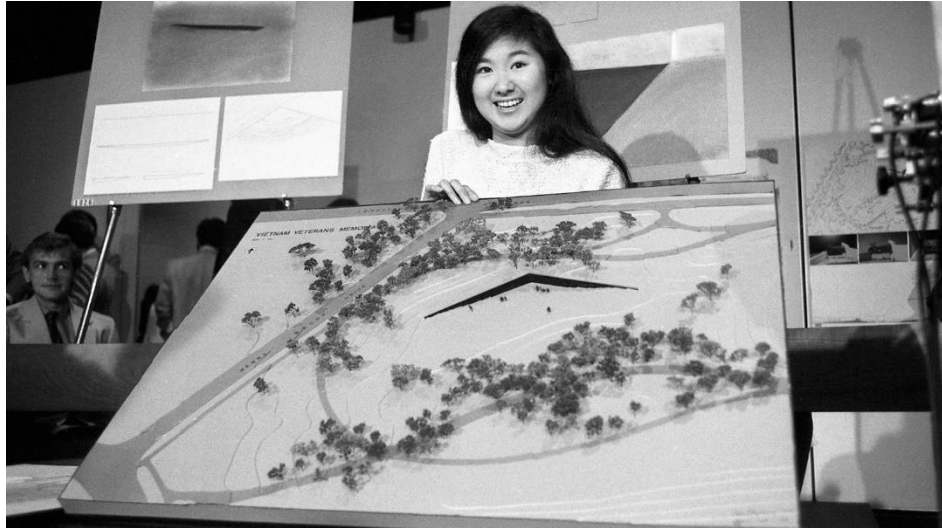


Image 3: Maya Lin presenting the miniature of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1981 (Vicente, 2007, p. 6).

In the same way, the walls do not form a straight line. They both emerge from the middle point of the memorial and open slightly in a diagonal trend. In that way, Maya aimed to represent a weak victory in form of a timid “V”. That statement becomes more significant once the viewer understands that it also symbolized a book. An open book which suggests that the Vietnam War requests a chapter in American history and reveals that there are more chapters to be written and read. The book also would not remember the war through detailed historical events, but through the names of approximately those 58,000 Americans who passed away or were not found in Vietnam (Griswold & Griswold, 1986, pp. 706-708).

Yet, due to the delicate social opinion about the war, the monument was not supposed to express triumphalism and that led to thousands of sharp critics from the very beginning. Some of them were relatively easily solved. For instance, Maya Lin proposed a chronological order to list the names of those who did not return from Vietnam. She aimed to create a kind of epic poem which would move veterans to the time of the war. In disagreement with that, veterans were looking for a more practical alternative. They asked for an alphabetical order so that the search of names would be easier for relatives and friends. Nonetheless, they gave up when they became aware of the possible phone-book effect repetitive surnames would cause. Simultaneously Maya assumed the petition

of including two sentences opening the list of names<sup>6</sup> and other two closing it<sup>7</sup>. Despite being insignificant, that little change interfered with the initial aesthetical vision (Carney, 1993, p. 215).

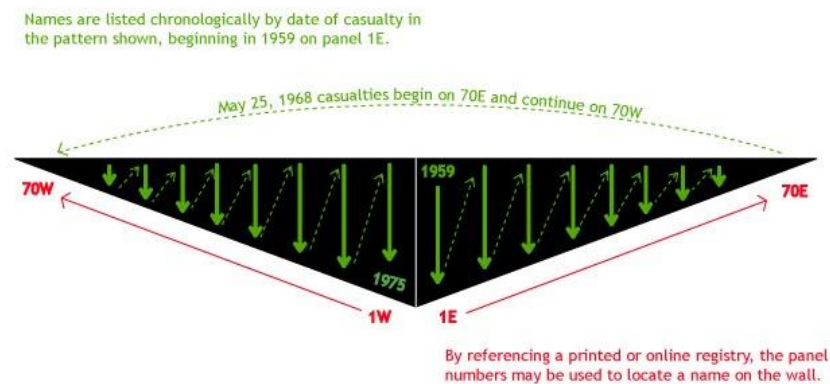


Image 4: The distribution of the names in the VVM (taken from <https://www.nps.gov/vive/faqs.htm>).

In any case, the controversy was far from being over. For example, Tom Carhart, an honoured former Vietnam veteran publicly complained in the *New York Times* about how insulting the VVM was to all the people who sacrificed their lives for the United States of America. Literally, he called it “a black gash of shame and dishonour” (Hass, 1998, pp. 15-16). That commentary can be understood because white had historically been the official colour for memorials since it was associated with light and hope. That is the reason why white can be found in other war memorials of the Mall. For example, that is the case of the World War II Memorial or the Korean War Memorial, built not so much time ago<sup>8</sup> (Perreault, 2014, p. 178).

The proper Tom Carhart underlined that there was not anything more respectable for an American hero than being remembered in a fine white marble edifice. However,

<sup>6</sup> “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 REMAINING MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THAT THEY WERE TAKEN FROM US.” (Ochsner, 1997, p. 158).

<sup>7</sup> “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.” (Ochsner, 1997, p. 158).

<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Vietnam was an exception considering the previous wars. Citing Jim, a former Vietnam veteran in *In Country*, “Take my daddy. He thinks I should have been just like him fighting in the Pacific in the second big one. But he was on a ship and could see the Japanese coming. He knew who the enemy was. He knew what he was fighting for. You can’t tell him Vietnam was any difference. He’s hardheaded” (Keskiner, 2000, p. 145).

the Fine Arts Commission did not share that traditional idea and supported Maya in using black coloured stone (Carney, 1993, p. 215). Rather than heroism, dark tones are commonly linked to negative feelings and the absence of bright light. Nevertheless, the designer insisted on her initiative as that material would create a mirror effect. That way, while reading veterans' names, visitors would see themselves reflected and interact with the monument. That also contributed to enforce the reflexive attitude towards the war (Perreault, 2014, p. 178).

In general, it was the conservative press the one that did not fully accept the proposed project. Journals like the *Moral Majority Weekly* and *National Review* referred respectively to the VVM as a “tribute to Jane Fonda<sup>9</sup>” and as an “Orwellian glob”. Not even to mention the editorial published in September 1981, again in the *National Review*, which requested a public intervention. In addition to that, other critics pointed out that the “V” form was a clear allusion to the peace of sign or even to the Vietcong (Hass, 1998, pp. 15-16). Not even to mention the active refusal of decisive sponsors like Ross Perot. From the collected donations (more than 8,000,000 \$) he, a single person, contributed 170,000 \$, about 2% of the sum. For that reason, he demanded a celebrative and glorifying monument (Marling & Silberman, 1987, pp. 9-10).

To make things more controversial, the selected designer to build the military memorial was precisely a young female Chinese-American undergraduate. Actually, her project was initially an academic task for Yale University. Precisely Maya Lin's formation in an *Ivy League*<sup>10</sup> college was used as an excuse by many critics. She was described as a liberal hippie student who was part of a high cultured elite. Supposedly she aimed to impose her art and ideology on some disappointed and defeated warriors. In addition, the lack of veterans being part of the jury added more distrust to the project and put the legitimacy of the jury into question (Vicente, 2007, pp. 7-8).

---

<sup>9</sup> Despite joining the anti-war movement quite late, from 1969 Jane Fonda became a relevant pacifist. At the beginning of the 1970s she played an important role in the youth social movements and, for that reason, in 1973 she was welcomed to Hanoi. There she experienced the Vietnam War and got in contact with US soldiers. During her travel she used the media as a platform to broadcast a pacifist message. That is the reason why she was seen as a traitor by the government, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and many Americans (Hershberger, 2004, p. 547 & 551).

<sup>10</sup> *Ivy League* is the common way to name the most prestigious private universities of North America's Atlantic Coast. It refers to the sports association between Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Pennsylvania, Princeton and, of course, Yale Universities. Nevertheless, that aggrupation carries a deeper sociopolitical meaning for mainly receiving students coming from highly educated upper-middle-class families (Vicente, 2007, p. 20, note 27).

But if that was not enough, the debate became more critical when political figures were involved. The recently elected Republican President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) perceived the minimalist design as a threat owing to its apparent liberal strong political statement. As a way to please detractors, in January 1982 the construction of the VVM was stopped for an indefinite time. Representing the Secretary of the Interior, James Watt agreed with Jan Scruggs and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to introduce several changes to the design. Unlike the previous correction when Maya was informed about the incorporation of opening and closing sentences, this time she was excluded from the recent news. Having known that Maya was not aware, it was planned the building of a sculpture of a warrior and a national flag with an inscription<sup>11</sup> (Carney, 1993, pp. 215-216)



Image 5. The statue of the *Three Fighting Men* (Marling & Silberman, 1987, p. 6).

As an effective way to reject the existing ambiguity and abstraction, Conservatives, and mainly James Watt, expected to place the bronze statues just in the

---

<sup>11</sup> “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.” (Griswold & Griswold, 1986, p. 710).

heart of the monument. For that commitment, the artist Frederick Hart was the selected one, who by the way was part of the team that reached third place in the VVM competition. Nevertheless, in the end the single statue was replaced by the sculpture of three soldiers and, along with the flag, they were settled around 35 metres away from the entry<sup>12</sup> (Carney, 1993, p. 216).

Apart from the mentioned negative attitudes, the VVM was equally admired. If the explicit connotation of a disastrous war meant an offence for some, others praised that idea. For instance, the VVMF and other veterans' institutions, such as the Veterans Foreign Wars and the American Legion, expressed their gratitude to Maya's project, at least in public. Overall, the great majority of Vietnam veterans responded with a reserved agreement. After all, in general they never stopped doing campaigns in favour of the memorial. Likewise, many other articles defended the design of the monument and its conciliatory aspect. Prestigious writers like James Kilpatrick referred to it as "the most moving memorial ever created". Just to add another example, a *New York Times* editorial encouraged to reflect on the changing meaning of patriotism and emphasized the way the VVM captured the new American values (Hass, 1998, p. 16).

Eventually, and just having received a B in Yale's funerary architecture class, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial was officially finished. The ceremony took part on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1982, the Veterans Day, meaning that the building was ready two years earlier than it was expected. In any case, from that time on, the media<sup>13</sup> has underlined the touching feelings visitors experience when they find themselves face to face with the VVM for the first time. That affection is transmitted through the significant objects left by the visiting people for personal reasons<sup>14</sup> (Carney, 1993, p. 216).

---

<sup>12</sup> Hart's work, among the Vietnam Women's Memorial, interferes with the initial message of the VVM as it is the only addition that distances from the mourning sentiment to highlight a political construction (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 85, note 7). Actually, the contradictory relationship between Maya's and Hart's memorialization is nothing else but the reflection of the social confrontation. For instance, citing Ann Mason's *In Country* "The Washington Monument is reflected at the centreline. If she moves slightly to the left, she sees the monument and if she moves the other way she sees a reflection of the flag opposite the memorial. Both the monument and the flag seem like arrogant gestures, like the country giving the finger to the dead boys, flung in this hole in the ground" (Keskiner, 2000, p. 152).

<sup>13</sup> The role the media played in the presentation of the wall is undeniable. With no other recent precedents, the VVM was "the first national war monument introduced to the public through television". That coverage explains why the VVM receives more than 10,000 travellers in a day, making it the most popular memorial in the capital city (Blair, et al., 1991, p. 263).

<sup>14</sup> The list of objects left by visitors is so large that it cannot be easily classified. Overall, most of the "gifts" (around 30%) are military possessions, among them, insignias, clothes, rewards and distinctive prizes. Apart from that, flowers, letters and poems are also commonly found, but not with a less patriotic meaning. Most of them indicate the impossibility of some people to separate personal judgements from the memory



Image 6: Objects left on the Wall and the mirror-effect (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 83).

## **The Concerned Actors**

### 1. Vietnam veterans

Washington D.C., and even more the National Mall, is the most sacred place in the United States. Such a *holly* location is just a way to report the social indifference and hostility Vietnam veterans had suffered for years (Torre, 2004, pp. 18-19). Veterans whose average age when they moved to Vietnam was under 20<sup>15</sup>. But the age did not become a barrier to mythicise their figure. Actually, the fact of searching for a name that is engraved in a Trajan style<sup>16</sup> on a polished stone, raises the heroism of that person (Small, 1994, pp. 74-75 & 78).

But in any case, that respect is exclusively directed towards the individual. There is no unique detail remarking their position in the Army. That is a surprising omission coming from a military monument (Watkins, et al., 2010, p. 356). Yet, simultaneously, it means the dissolution of any kind of distinctive feature, in favour of a homogeneous and equally-aligned memory (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991, p. 400).

---

of the war (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991, pp. 404-406). Contrastingly, there is also a large list of unconventional items, such as notes, photographs, cowboy boots, a teddy or even a dollar bill with the note written across the front “A debt so long unpaid and the beer I promised” (Berdahl, 1994, pp. 96-97).

<sup>15</sup> Actually, Vietnamese people referred to them as “Baby-San”, meaning “dear young naïfs” (Small, 1994, p. 73).

<sup>16</sup> In reference to the Column of Trajan, which was built to celebrate the Trajan Emperor’s victory over the Dacian people. Even if there is a distance of almost twenty centuries, both monuments intentionally appeal to the emotions of their respective contemporary societies. Therefore, the feelings provoked in the next generations would be less touching (Ochsner, 1997, p. 169, note 31).



In fact, the interactive essence of the VVM plays a relevant role, as veterans can feel it like a historical monument or a personal refuge (Small, 1994, pp. 78-79). The large majority of memorials are conceived for passive contemplation. They do not facilitate the chance to get a physical connection with it. Just to mention an example, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, in Arlington National Cemetery, seeks to establish timid physical contact with the visitor. Moreover, uniformed military guards ensure everyone keeps a certain distance. Nevertheless, the VVM invites everybody to get closer. It demands active communication by touching every detail of the engraved names (Berdahl, 1994, p. 89).

Between 1964 and 1975 the United States sent 3,403,000 soldiers to Vietnam. Among the ones who returned, 479,000 young men (15.2% of the total<sup>17</sup>) suffered from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. These feelings could be manifested in three different ways: intrusive reexperiences (flashbacks, nightmares and recreations of the war), lack of physical sensation and avoidance (ignore feelings and avoid reminders of a loss or a trauma, including war films, firecrackers and hunting trips) and hyperarousal (extreme state of anxiety related to trauma or loss). In short words, PTSD provokes a long list of serious mental consequences<sup>18</sup>, which by the way were gravely intensified because of the initial unpopularity veterans suffered once they had gone back home (Watkins, et al., 2010, pp. 354-355).

And here is when that communication between the memorial and the subject makes sense. The VVM has been widely rewarded by the media and photograph books for its therapeutic function. Several reports highlight the benefits obtained for veterans dealing with PTSD due to a decisive factor: time. On the one hand, the number of times they visited the memorial. It is stated that the first time patients come around, experience a substantial increase in intrusive and hyperarousal symptoms. Moreover, these consequences would be even much more severe than the ones experienced before the

---

<sup>17</sup> That number is not so different from the one obtained in other US recent wars. For instance, 15% of those who fought in the Gulf War experienced PTSD and when it comes to Iraq and Afghanistan it rises above 17%. There are also no remarkable alterations concerning sex, age or race. However, there is a clear divergence based on the military position. Fundamentally, the more a soldier is exposed to war, the more severe symptoms he will feel. Therefore, there is a higher possibility to suffer PTSD for cadets and ground units than for high commands and Navy and Air Force personnel (Kang & Hyams, 2005, p. 1289).

<sup>18</sup> But the record becomes bigger if other chronic conditions are included (most of them related to PTSD). For instance, there have been relevant cases of alcohol and other psychoactive substances dependency and depression, which can lead to antisocial personality or, in the worst situations, to suicide (Price, et al., 2004, p. 35).

visit. Nevertheless, from the second stay on, the suffering tent to decrease and the path to recovery seems to be paved away (Watkins, et al., 2010, p. 352 & 359).

On the other hand, the time passed from the first trip. For instance, one week after the initial experience, intrusive and avoidance PTSD levels use to go down. The improvement is just the consequence of particular architectonic details (peaceful natural landscape, comforting touchable names, reflective-reflexive mirror effect...) and the personal atmosphere (the representation of the veteran as the individual person and the centre of his losses) of the VVM. That is to say, it provokes physical and psychological reactions in veterans' minds that at the beginning are difficult to confront and connect with. However, from a month on, patients are able to make clearer associations between the different experiences caused by the monument and assume the reality (Watkins, et al., 2010, pp. 364 & 366-368).

The VVM is said to be a "bad-tasting medicine". Even if firstly might incite adverse sensations, taken periodically will be effective in reducing the impact of the war trauma. A process that demands time and compromise. That is the reason why the VVM is suggested to be included in PTSD therapy treatment programmes (Watkins, et al., 2010, p. 369). Perhaps VVM's aid explains the booming of a "pilgrim-effect", as thousands of former soldiers occasionally travel to Washing D.C. annually. For example, on an occasion a terminally ill veteran all of a sudden took his car and travelled from his hometown in Texas to the East Coast. In his words "I told my wife I just had to get here to set this part of my life behind me [...] It really is worth the 1,300 miles." (Berdahl, 1994, p. 98).

## 2. Veterans' widows

The loss of a beloved person is not easy to assimilate. It is a timeless process where the individual jumps all of a sudden into a shocking trauma. Feelings like denial, helplessness, anger, etc., become common and can darken the mind of the person with disturbing thoughts (a violation of a possession or body, personal injury...). Finally, the transition can only be concluded once the loss is completely accepted (Watkins, et al., 2010, p. 353). Here is when transitional objects make sense. Blankets, pacifiers and toys are clear examples of transitional objects that soften the absence of a caregiver figure by providing safeness and warmth during childhood. The same logic can be attached to

memorials. In representing and commemorating a decease, the Wall was erected as an ambiguous visual and tactical witness to confront and understand the pain (Watkins, et al., 2010, pp. 353-354 & 372). By way of illustration, the wife of a soldier killed in Vietnam stated “I felt like I wanted to tiptoe because I was with all these men's spirits. Although I knew Bob’s body was buried... at home, I felt like he was there [at the Wall].” (Berdahl, 1994, p. 98).

The importance of narratives lays on the capacity to create a recording of events and emotions. That way the writer would feel he is in control of an unsteady reality. Countless women found a refuge in letters, especially during the previously explained silenced years and The Wall has therefore become the tomb where the words of unrecognized widows rest. The simple fact of having the chance to deposit them in a safe and accepted atmosphere offers widows a sense of social respect and consideration. In other words, a setting that serves both, as a way to broadcast a message and as a therapeutic mean (Fitzpatrick, 2011, pp. 70-72 & 79).

Furthermore, many widows keep nowadays a kind of relationship with their dead partner. Nevertheless, it would be a new evolved connection that derived from the previous romance to a situation where death is accepted as part of the present. In other words, despite the decease, those women maintain a fluent and active dialogue with their former spouses, challenging the barriers between the Earth and the Heaven<sup>19</sup>. For that reason, letters should be taken as a collection of selective memories instead of absolute facts. The following unsealed<sup>20</sup> one has precisely a significant relevance as it introduces a Vietnam widow’s personal story inside a national trauma (Fitzpatrick, 2011, pp. 70-71 & 79):

---

<sup>19</sup> The attitude of mixing the living and the dead in the same reality is a common reaction in our society to overcome mourning. Take New England’s graveyards as an example. Rather than isolated, they are generally located in the heart of the village. That way, the local community expresses its intention to provide a visible scenario for the death and the afterlife so that the whole town could contemplate the lost ones (Watkins, et al., 2010, p. 354).

<sup>20</sup> The Smithsonian Museum and the Federal Archive are the institutions in charge to store the letters. The personnel only read them in case of not being sealed or opened (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 74).

*Dearest Chuck,*

*This is the first time that I have written to you since April 1970 (1). But I know that you won't think it silly (2). I've written a lot of poems from my heartache of being without you (3). I wished that you weren't shipped out on that early flight. We would have been married before you left (4). Not seeing after made it hard to believe. I looked for you in the face of every young man (5). I thought about having your baby and making love to you (6). We really were ripped off of the most beautiful things in life.*

*They told me you didn't die right away. God I hope you didn't suffer too badly. It's not fair (7). They didn't know how gentle you were, how precious (8). I wonder if I will see you in heaven (9). I dream occasionally. They say you then know of my love (10). Remember the letter you wrote. When you said you were fighting a war you didn't understand? (11). It seemed no one really understood. We were only 19 then babe and here I am 16 years later, still wondering. I went to the cemetery once in California where they buried you (12). I hope you saw me (13). This is all very hard for me. Even now I still have the ring you gave me and all the poems and pictures (14). I have a special friend now who understands all this. He listens to the story of how we met and all the crazy things that we did. He knows how much I love you even now. It's the only thing that did not die or end (15). God be with you Chuck. I'll always dream of you.*

*Love,  
Cher*

Image 7: a Vietnam veteran widow's letter left on the Wall in the late 1980s (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 73).

Through those moving words Cher expresses anger (common evidence of pain, especially in sudden or violent deaths), sense of loss (by describing a stolen future where they would have extended the family) and political criticism (by questioning the morality of the war). But beyond that probably the most remarking aspect would be the continuous renegotiation concerning the love and the place Chuck takes on Cher's current life. The continuous contrast between past, present and future sentences and the references to "I" and "we" reveals a persistent link in light of unconcluded affairs and the process of the loss. But simultaneously, she introduces him to a new partner. In other words, Cher establishes a present where her old and new lover coexist in the same reality. After all, even though Cher's life goes on, she points out that Chuck is still part of it (Fitzpatrick, 2011, pp. 73-75).

However, everything that glitters is not gold. The mere fact of having a memorial to heal means little if there is no political or social consideration behind. That is, many widows do not formally count with that status because there is not any legal document

linking them to their lover. That was the case of many young girlfriends like Cher, who regrets not having married before the war. Consequently, the same country, in which name fought their partners for, excluded many women from a state pension and the respect reserved for official Vietnam War widows (Fitzpatrick, 2011, pp. 73-74).

### 3. Female veterans

Widows were not the only women to be underestimated. More than 265,000 women worked for the US military during the Vietnam era, all of them were volunteers<sup>21</sup>. Even if there are no precise numbers to confirm it<sup>22</sup>, approximately between 10,000 and 11,000 women were thought to be stationed or performed a military duty. Likewise, some of them were civilian women who served a non-profitable association (such as the Red Cross, United Service Organizations, the American Friends Service Committee or the Catholic Relief Services), whereas others were part of the Armed Forces (Evans, 1982, pp. 13-16).

In Vietnam women fulfilled numerous affairs, such as intelligence, public affairs, supply, air traffic control, special services, administration, finance, therapy and dietetics. But beyond that they mainly directed their efforts to nursing, a position taken by more than 85% of American females in Vietnam. They save more than 350,000 souls, meaning that 76% of the treated veterans survived (Evans, 1982, pp. 16-17). Amputations, critical brain damages, tetraplegia and even the consequences derived from malaria, typhoid, parasitic illnesses, plagues... everything was expected to be treated, yet under the worse possible conditions (Scannell-Desch, 1996, pp. 120-121).

No sooner had nurses left the comfort of the USA behind, than the lack of decent equipment and supplies became a worrying issue. Not even to mention the exhausting workload (12 hours continuously during 6 days). According to a testimony, “you just work, sleep, and go back to work. I honestly don’t know how I did it, being the only nurse on nights with 18 ICU patients and having to mix all my own IVs”<sup>23</sup>. Every day in

---

<sup>21</sup> For a matter of patriotism, adventure or professional stagnation (Scannell-Desch, 1996, p. 120).

<sup>22</sup> There is a considerable unbalance regarding academic research about women in Vietnam. The first attempt to find out the reality of female veterans on a national scale was a work summited in 1996 (Evans, 1982, p. 17). Before that time, only three unpublished works and seven minor mentions covered that matter (Scannell-Desch, 1996, p. 119). And studies become more uncertain in the case of African American women (Black, 2006, p. 28).

<sup>23</sup> Author’s cite (Scannell-Desch, 1996, p. 120).

Vietnam caregivers felt the pressure of a moral dilemma, as their mission was essentially to assist fighter men so that they could face the death again on the battlefield as soon as possible (Scannell-Desch, 1996, pp. 120-124).

If those difficulties were not hard enough, they suffered from additional problems in light of their sex. For instance, they depended on the tampons their families sent as it was not common to find female stock products. Besides, they were involved in an uneasy military environment where men, alcohol and drugs were abundant. Some of the nurses actually admitted to suffer sexual harassment, in which case was hardly reported to the male superiors. Once the war was over, such a big underestimation worsened in certain cases and many felt second-class employees. In the words of a nurse “my skills weren’t welcome. In my ICU, I can remember asking doctors questions and being told you’re the nurse, shut up, this is the way I want to do it. They told me my main job was to get coffee. I was so disgusted with stateside nursing, I volunteered for another tour in Vietnam.”<sup>24</sup> (Scannell-Desch, 1996, pp. 121-123). As well as their male fellows, military nurses were not free from being diagnosed with PTSD<sup>25</sup> or other consequences (Evans, 1982, p. 17).

Once Maya Lin’s memorial was finished, many veteran women felt honoured. From 1982 on the names of the eight military women who passed away in the war share a space in the VVM along with their lost male patients and colleagues, giving them the chance to process the healing and remember a meaningful experience. Military nurses like Diane Carlson Evans agreed on the culmination of the Wall, yet criticized the addition of *The Three Soldiers* for reopening the debate about the war. According to her, it meant an unbalance as the Vietnam War would only be illustrated by a bronze sculpture of three men<sup>26</sup>. It was also the time to show the people’s gratitude to military women, as from the

---

<sup>24</sup> Author’s cite (Scannell-Desch, 1996, p. 122).

<sup>25</sup> Particularly the case of Juddy Matron was really significant. Having served in Vietnam as a nurse, she had depression due to the suffered sexual harassments, PTSD and alcoholism. Although she tried to find assistance in the Veterans Administration, she did not feel supported as there were not proper programs for female veterans. Finally, in 1982 Juddy decided to end her life by jumping off from the Golden Gate bridge (Culbertson, 1985, pp. 97-98).

<sup>26</sup> The statue has been criticized for its meaning. It represents a white soldier above the other two African American and Asian fellows. All of the figures inspire strength, masculinity, heroism and even a kind of providential nature of the war (Hass, 1998, p. 18). What is more, some authors go further by claiming that it embraces the traditional stoic and triumphalist mythical American soldier’s image. As a consequence, such a patriarchal vision not only overshadows women, but also imposes an inflexible identity on male veterans (Keskiner, 2000, pp. 139-141 & 152-153). On the contrary, others have softer judgement and believe that it looks as if the three men were carefully reading the names of Maya’s memorial in a respectful attitude, rather than a solemn or heroic one (Griswold & Griswold, 1986, pp. 709-710).

110 memorials of the Mall only three were dedicated to women and none to women's military service (Evans, 1982, pp. 1-2 & 8).

The incorporation of the new statue set the basis for another one. In 1984 Diane created the non-profit entity Vietnam Women's Memorial Project (VWMP). The main goal was to build a memorial recognizing all those military and civilian women who took part in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the organization pretended as well to fulfil other tasks, such as the public education about the Vietnam women (Evans, 1982, pp. 2-4).

For the election of the design, in August 1990 the VWMP organised a competition. Just like the previous Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the jury was formed by prestigious academic experts. Nevertheless, unlike the other case<sup>27</sup>, this time the VWMP did have a say on the final resolution. What is more, veterans were included on the jury and the opinion of the most influential veterans associations<sup>28</sup> was to be taken into account before presenting the project. Eventually the jury took Glenna Goodacre's as the winner<sup>29</sup>. The initiative counted with the support of influential figures (Senator Edward Kennedy, Senator John Kerry...), sponsors (William Joiner Centre of the University of Massachusetts, Northwest Airlines, American Nurses Association...) and means of communications (the TV program 60 Minutes served as a megaphone in broadcasting the episodes of five military nurses, the *Indianapolis News* encouraged political support for "one of the most effective and powerful memorials built in this country"<sup>30</sup>...) (Evans, 1982, pp. 2-9 & 12-14).

---

<sup>27</sup> In the competition won by Maya Lin, the VVMF thought about including not only veterans, but also women and African Americans as candidates for the jury. However, that idea was rejected because it might create problems between veterans' and professional juries' criteria. When it comes to women and African Americans, apparently they did not find any knowledgeable one (Hass, 1998, p. 12).

<sup>28</sup> Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America and the Vietnam Veterans of America (Evans, 1982, p. 13)

<sup>29</sup> Glenna's work was a bronze sculpture of four characters: a wounded male veteran, a white nurse holding the man in her arms, an African American woman comforting the nurse and looking to the sky and a third woman taking medical equipment on her knees (Hass, 1998, p. 19).

<sup>30</sup> Author's cite (Evans, 1982, p. 12).



Image 8: Glenna Goodacre's Vietnam Women's Memorial (taken from: <https://vvmf.wordpress.com/2022/04/04/40-top-photos-taken-at-the-wall-as-chosen-by-the-volunteers-of-the-vietnam-veterans-memorial/>).

Regardless of the campaigns to widen the base of sympathizers, the VWMP was equally the target of many critics. Their members were considered to be radical feminists (Evans, 1982, p. 4) and several renowned artists underestimated the sculpture for being an uninspiring *pietà* (Hass, 1998, p. 19). Even some newspapers seemed to agree on that point. In the case of the *Washington Post*, Benjamin Forgey wrote a column referring to the statue as a “bad precedent”<sup>31</sup> and added “the Nurse in answer to Hart's statue has no psychological or physical relationship with the memorial as a whole”<sup>32</sup>. What is more, the proper Frederick Hart personally defended his *Three Fighting Men* statue and stated that his work already spoke for “symbolic of humankind and everyone who served”<sup>33</sup>. Not even to mention Maya Lin's objection, who argued that “I am as opposed to this new addition as I was to the last. I cannot see where it will end”<sup>34</sup> (Evans, 1982, pp. 4 & 8-9).

The excessive proliferation of memorials claiming an identity of a particular community was not only a fear shared by Maya, but also by politicians. For that reason, in 1986 the Congress passed the Commemorative Works Act. As a way to stop the

---

<sup>31</sup> Author's cite (Evans, 1982, p. 9).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Author's cite (Evans, 1982, p. 8).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* See also Maya Lin's documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLSJjh8yEa0> (visited on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2022).



“ghettoization”<sup>35</sup> of the Constitution Gardens of the Mall, the previous legislation was hardened and every new memorial or extension required the unanimous agreement of the Secretary of the Interior, the Commission of Fine Arts, the National Capital Planning Commission and the National Capital Memorial Commission (Evans, 1982, pp. 7-9).

Finally, due to promotion work and bureaucratic issues, the Vietnam Women’s Memorial (VWM) was built five years later than it was expected. In 1989 Republican President George Bush (1989-1993) authorized an area three hundred feet from the Wall for the VWM. The construction began in March 1993 and the project was officially opened the same year on Veterans Day under the words of the Democrat Vice President Al Gore (1993-2001) “Let’s all resolve that this memorial serves as a vehicle for healing our nation’s wounds. Let’s never again take so long in honoring a debt”<sup>36</sup>. Many women who served in Vietnam felt for the first time respected, like Gail Hager who told Diane “My heart is still over-flowing with feelings from my experiences in D.C. You have given each of us women a priceless gift—the gift of hope and healing. For us to be recognized, honored, appreciated, and united was unbelievable”<sup>37</sup>. Even some male veterans expressed their gratitude, particularly a wounded Marine came to Diane and confessed “I would not be alive today without the super professional service of the American women the memorial honors”<sup>38</sup> (Evans, 1982, pp. 6 & 14-15).

#### 4. African American veterans

The participation of African Americans in Vietnam is by large undeniable<sup>39</sup>. More than 300,000 dressed in military uniform (Lucks, 2017, p. 196). Overall such a large number is explained by two main facts. Firstly, the socioeconomic advantages offered by the Army. In 1967 for instance, the black unemployment rate doubled the one of the whites and set above 7%. As a way of illustration, despite the fact of being married and

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Author’s cite (Evans, 1982, p. 15).

<sup>37</sup> Author’s cite (Evans, 1982, p. 14).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, African Americans were not the first African descendants to combat communists in the region. Many soldiers from francophone African colonies like Senegal, Mali, Niger o Guinea were sent between the forties and the fifties to fight the Vietnamese uprising. Actually, when the USA got involved after a while, Vietnamese people called African American soldiers “Les Senegalaise” (Black, 2006, p. 24). But the difference was that the French West African troops were colonial subjects repressing a liberation movement. In consequence, no sooner had France been humiliated at Dien Bien Phu than revolutionary movement broke out in places like Algeria (Ginio, 2017, pp. 77-79).

having three kids, Charles Hall joined the Army armed forces as “the job opportunities outside just weren’t that good. The Army is taking care of me and my family.”<sup>40</sup>. Not even to mention the social consideration and status it gave to serve a military unit, a prestige precisely high along the black community. After all, the Army was thought to be a getaway to fully integrate and be recognized in the American society, especially in the early sixties when racial segregation was legitimate in the south and discrimination was still visible in the rest of the states (Westheider, 2002, pp. 333-334).

Secondly, in 1966 the Democrat Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (1961-1968) authorized the Project 100,000. The political initiative made admission tests easier the so as to raise manpower. As a result of that, despite representing only 11% of the US population, African Americans meant 41% of the selected applicants between 1966 and 1969, the majority of whom were undereducated (Lucks, 2017, pp. 200-202). Once they came back, they received the same welcome and suffer from the same health illnesses as their white fellows (Black, 2006, p. 27).

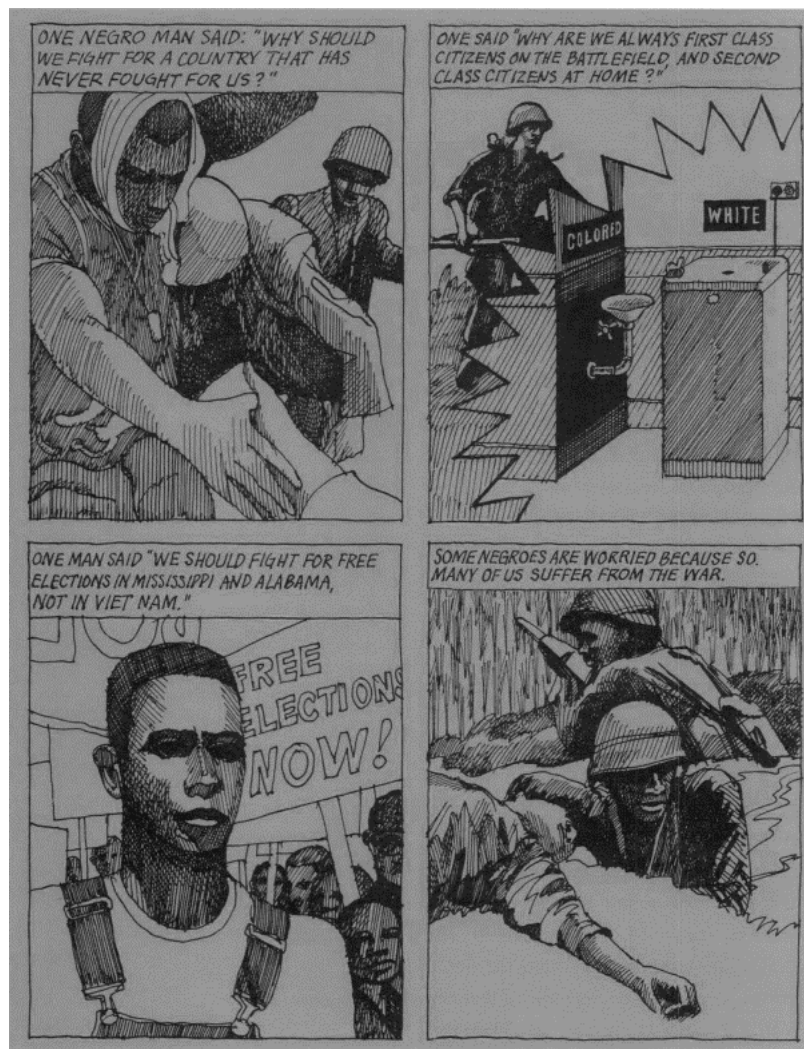
In the same way, they were not excluded from memorialization. Actually, the names of the 7,241 African Americans killed in Vietnam (Westheider, 2002, p. 334) are equally part of the 58,000 men and women represented in the Wall. Furthermore, when it comes to the additions, the *Three Fighting Men* and the VWM include respectively a male (Griswold & Griswold, 1986, p. 709) and a female African American figure (Hass, 1998, p. 19). Nevertheless, something is missing. Contrastingly to the given explanations, the complex of the VWM is not precisely popular among black people. For example, on Veterans Day 1984, 100,000 people gathered in front of the Wall, less than 1% of whom were African American veterans. What is more, there have been occasions when black veterans have organized their own parades separately (Carney, 1993, p. 218). These facts became more intriguing taking into account that African Americans were fighting for the first time with the greatest political rights ever recognized, due to Brown versus Topeka Kansas Board Education (confirmed in 1954), the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) (Black, 2006, p. 25).

However, the recently passed liberties were just part of an illusion that did not fix the reality all of a sudden (Black, 2006, p. 25). For example, all the cadets had to pass the Armed Forces Qualification Test, which would determine one’s position in the military.

---

<sup>40</sup> Author’s cite (Westheider, 2002, pp. 333-334).

As topics were mainly Eurocentric and the initial education of white people was higher, “a Negro has to give two hundred percent where a white man just has to keep his nose clean to make sergeant”<sup>41</sup>. Additionally, an African American was twice more likely to be judged by a Military Court than a white soldier. Besides, graffiti like “niggers eat shit”<sup>42</sup> or “coons please go back to Africa”<sup>43</sup> and Confederate flags were easily found in Vietnam’s military bases. Plus, blacks were banned from plenty of bars, restaurants and brothels in cities like Saigon. In other words, rather than the promised egalitarian brotherhood, once in the Army many African Americans found unwelcomed by a racist institution, complicating that way a real integration (Westheider, 2002, pp. 337 & 339-341).



<sup>41</sup> Author’s cite (Westheider, 2002, p. 337).

<sup>42</sup> Author’s cite (Westheider, 2002, p. 339).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Image 9: Strips from the comic *Vietnam* written in 1967 by Julian Bond, whose seat in the Georgia House of Representatives was denied regarding his anti-war position (Black, 2006, p. 26).

In any case, tensions between the two racial communities rose after the late sixties. Publications like *Ebony*, *Muhammad Speaks*, *Pittsburgh Courier* or *Bloods* provided an African American vision of the war and thought they were being used (Black, 2006, p. 25). Moreover, representing the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Walter Collin argued that the war was “a totalitarian instrument used to practice genocide against black people”<sup>44</sup> regarding the disproportion of deaths among blacks and whites. Not even to mention the anti-war position of organizations like Black Panther Party or Nation of Islam. Besides, the shooting of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, which increased violence and a self-segregation feeling between black and white soldiers (Westheider, 2002, pp. 335-336 & 342). For all those facts, for African-Americans it was senseless to sacrifice their own life for some democratic values that were hardly respected in their hometown. Furthermore, it comes with little surprise to know that Vietnam was precisely the place where a black consciousness movement emerged (Black, 2006, pp. 24-26).

---

<sup>44</sup> Author’s cite (Westheider, 2002, p. 335).

## **Conclusion**

From the presented research about Washington D.C.'s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it can be concluded that the USA did not behave well with its own veterans. Politicians, either Republicans or Democrats, betrayed the popular will to stop an unscrupulous war, thus causing the death of 58,000 bewildered citizens. Not even the state itself or society dared to face reality and fight against the stigma veterans suffered. Not even their widows received moral compensation (and also economic in some cases) for the loss of their lover. And even when the memorial was made, it took too much time, meaning that many people passed away (either for natural reasons or for the aftermaths of the war) having the rejection of a whole country in mind and without finding peace. Furthermore, the monument, which precisely was the minimum gesture that these people deserved, was done with patriotic additions and undervaluing the participation of half of the society, women.

As it was stated in the first lines, this paper seeks to understand if an architectural setting would be inclusive with everyone. Taking into account the aforementioned additions, not everybody felt part of the memorial at first sight. But even if the extensions were taken into account, there would be still communities like the African American where the sense of belonging practically does not exist. Therefore, the VVM fails on the most fundamental duty: to heal and reconcile a nation. Actually, it revived a sensitive concern and created more controversy than the previously existing one. Nevertheless, if the memorial does not work does not mean it was contemplated erroneously. The division created by the VVM is nothing more than the reflection of the opened wounds inside the US society which are still persistent.

In all likelihood that would explain the reason why the VVM is a contradiction itself. It is an antipatriotic wall (in the sense that represents an alternative national idea) in the heart of the nation. That is to say, the monument that does not emphasises a clear political vision and rejects all kinds of national feeling, shares space with monumental memorials that embrace stronger than anywhere the traditional US identity. After all, societies change, so does their form of representation. For that reason, the VVM is claimed to be an anti-monument.

Finally, one may not agree with the idea transmitted by the Wall, but it cannot be denied its pioneering initiative. The most prodigious minds in the United States have been

responsible for creating for years a capital city with all kinds of monuments, details and shapes. But never before has anyone in American history created such a reserved and minimalist representation. That does not only embody a stylistic rupture, behind this it hides a new way of honouring memory. A memory that is built giving the total prominence to the visitor and that for the first time makes the viewer the protagonist of his own history. After all, you could see images without people about the Washington Monument or Lincoln Memorial and nothing would happen. Nonetheless, that would not be possible with the VVM since it cannot be understood without the visitor, thus creating a feeling of emptiness and incompleteness. Regarding the mentioned reasons, all over Washing D.C. memorials are abundant, but nowhere in Washington D.C. a memorial is more alive than the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

## **Bibliography**

- Berdahl, D., 1994. "Voices at the Wall: Discourses of Self, History and National Identity at the Vietnam Veterans". *History and Memory*, 6 (2), pp. 88-124.
- Black, S. W., 2006. "Soul Soldiers: African Americans and the Vietnam Era". *Western Pennsylvania History*, (Winter 2006-07), pp. 22-31.
- Blair, C., Jeppeson, M. S. & Pucci, E. J., 1991. "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype". *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77 (3), pp. 263-288.
- Carney, L. S., 1993. "Not Telling Us What to Think: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial". *Metaphor and Symbol*, 8 (3), pp. 211-219.
- Culbertson, S. M., 1985. "Why We Need A National Women Veterans Memorial". *Minerva: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military*, 3 (4), pp. 103-107.
- De la Guardia, C., 2019. *La Construcción del Sueño Americano (Estados Unidos, 1929-2018)*. Madrid: Síntesis.
- Evans, D. C., 1982. "Moving a Vision: The Vietnam Women's Memorial" (<http://www.vietnamwomensmemorial.org/pdf/dcevans.pdf>)
- Fitzpatrick, P., 2011. "Widows at the Wall: An Exploration of the Letters Left at the Vietnam War Memorial". *Mortality*, 16 (1), pp. 70-86.
- Ginio, R., 2017. *The French Army and its African Soldiers: The Years of Decolonization*. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Griswold, C. L. & Griswold, S. S., 1986. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography". *Critical Inquiry*, 12(4), pp. 688-719.
- Hass, K. H., 1998. *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hershberger, M., 2004. "Peace Work, War Myths: Jane Fonda and the Antiwar Movement". *Peace & Change*, 29 (3&4), pp. 549-579.
- Hill, J., 2017. *100 Years, 100 Landscape Designs*. Munich: Prestel.
- Jones, M. A., 1996. *Historia de Estados Unidos, 1607-1992*. Madrid: Cátedra.

- Kang, H. K. & Hyams, K. C., 2005. "Mental Health Care Needs Among Recent War Veterans". *New England Journal of Medicine*, 352 (13), p. 1289.
- Keskiner, I. D., 2000. "(De)construction of American Masculinity Through Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Bobbie Ann Mason's In Country". *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, Issue 53, pp. 137-155.
- Lucks, D., 2017. "African American Soldiers and the Vietnam War: no more Vietnams". *The Sixties*, 10 (2), pp. 196-220.
- Mackey-Kallis, S. & Ian, M., 2008. "Bruce Springsteen, Ronald Reagan and the American Dream". *Popular Music and Society*, 16 (14), pp. 1-9.
- Marling, K. A. & Silberman, R., 1987. "The Statue Near the Wall: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Art of Remembering". *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, 1 (1), pp. 5-29.
- Nye, J. S., 2020. *Do Morals Matter?: Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ochsner, J. K., 1997. "A Space of Loss: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial". *Journal of Architectural Education*, 50 (3), pp. 156-171.
- Perreault, C., 2014. "Maya Ying Lin's Design: While Enduring Much Criticism and Debate, the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial has Created a Lasting, Influential Dialogue about Honor and Public Art for Future Generations". *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, 7 (4), pp. 177-185.
- Price, R. K. et al., 2004. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Drug Dependence, and Suicidality among Male Vietnam Veterans with a History of Heavy Drug Use". *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 76 (Supplement), pp. 31-43.
- Ritchie, D. A., 1998. "Investigating the Watergate Scandal". *OAH Magazine of History*, 12 (4), pp. 49-53.
- Scannell-Desch, E. A., 1996. "The Lived Experience of Women Military Nurses in Vietnam during the Vietnam War". *Image: The Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 28 (2), pp. 119-124.



- Small, L. M., 1994. "Grave Goods and Social Identity at the Vietnam War Memorial". *Studies in Popular Culture* , 16 (2), pp. 73-84.
- Torre, S., 2004. "Ciudad, memoria y espacio público: el caso de los monumentos a los detenidos y desaparecidos". *Memoria y sociedad*, 10 (20), pp. 17-24.
- Vicente, H., 2007. "El reverso de lo monumental. Memorial de los Veteranos de Vietnam". *Cuaderno de Notas*, Issue 11, pp. 1-24.
- Wagner-Pacifici, R. & Schwartz, B., 1991. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past". *American journal of Sociology*, 97(2), pp. 376-420.
- Watkins, N., Cole, F. & Weidemann, S., 2010. "The War Memorial as Healing Environment: The Psychological Effect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Vietnam War Combat Veterans' Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms". *Environment and Behavior* , 42(3), pp. 351-375.
- Westad, O. A., 2018. *La Guerra Fría: Una historia mundial*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg.
- Westheider, J., 2002. "African Americans and the Vietnam War". In: M. B. Young & R. Buzzanco, eds. *A Companion to the Vietnam War*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 333-347.