

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## A Meaning for Monuments

WILLIAM HUBBARD

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*War memorials and monuments such as those discussed in the preceding selections pay homage to the fallen not only by recognizing their valor but also by celebrating the cause for which they gave their lives. This is more easily done when the cause is popular. But how do we remember the dead in an unpopular war? The Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC designed by then 21-year-old Maya Lin, may be said to be our nation's answer, and it has drawn and moved thousands of visitors from the day it was unveiled (November 13, 1982). At the same time, objections to the memorial from veterans and other critics prompt serious reflection about the purposes of our war memorials and how best to honor and remember the fallen. In this 1984 essay (excerpted), American architect William Hubbard (b. 1947) thoughtfully explores these questions, beginning with his reflections about the Vietnam Memorial.<sup>1</sup>*

*What does Hubbard experience at the Vietnam Memorial? Why, then, given that he finds it moving, does he say that it “does not speak”? In what way does Hubbard believe that a monument should speak, and to what purposes? How are monuments supposed to represent our ideals? What if our ideals are contested? What sort of thinking should our monuments engender? Why, according to Hubbard, and for what purposes might monuments be superior to words?*

Upon first seeing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., columnist James J. Kilpatrick reacted with these words:

We walked . . . and gradually the long walls of the monument came into view. Nothing I had heard of or written had prepared me for the moment. I could not speak. I wept. There are the names. The names! . . . For twenty years I have contended that these men died in a cause as noble as any cause for which a war was ever fought. Others have contended, and will always contend, that these dead were uselessly sacrificed in a no-win war that should never have been waged at all. Never mind. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> For a more recent and in part a competing assessment of the Vietnam Memorial, see “The Power of a Name: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at 30,” by the distinguished architect, Allan Greenberg, here: [www.city-journal.org/2012/22\\_3\\_urb-vietnam-veterans-memorial.html](http://www.city-journal.org/2012/22_3_urb-vietnam-veterans-memorial.html).

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The experience of the names is an emotion that unites us all.

Indeed it is the impact of the names that overwhelms. The names of the dead and missing, nearly 58,000 of them, carved into a wall of mirror-polished black granite folded at the center to form a wide splay, one leg pointing at the Lincoln Memorial, the other toward the Washington Monument. The wall itself is set into the earth, its top edge exactly level with the flat ground behind, the earth in front scooped away in a gentle slope to reveal the names. The scooping, ten feet deep at the point of the splay, slopes gradually upward to rejoin the surrounding land at the ends of the wall, some two hundred feet away. The feeling, upon entering the precinct of the monument, is one of descending into a shallow bowl in the earth, the ground held back by this tapering dam of black granite.

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## *Private grief and public monuments*

On my first visit to the memorial, walking that slow descent into the earth along the face of the wall, I too wept. It was indeed the names, the names beyond counting. As I walked, and stood, and moved on again, I passed and was passed by the people who had come that day to find the names of friends or kin, or simply to see this memorial to the war that had touched us all in some way or another. Those of us who had come to see simply stood and ran our eyes over the length and height of the wall. But those who had come to find—they had a more pointed mission. They could be seen kneeling or standing before one particular spot in the wall, staring long at one name out of the thousands, their eyes welling with tears. We others allowed a circle of distance around each of these solitary mourners lost in their thoughts, keeping our own shared thoughts to a quiet murmur.

We talked, stranger to stranger, of the names—first of their number, but then of their arrangement—not alphabetical nor by hometown nor by military unit nor by any of those chance groupings by which we are arranged in life. Not by those, but by the final, personal ordering of the moment of death. The names begin on one side of the fold in the wall, with the first soldier lost in 1959. They continue in columns, moment by moment and year by year, out to the end of that wall, to resume at the far end of the other wall, continuing on until the last moment of the war in 1975, back at the fold where the sequence began, the last name joined to the first. We talked, in whispers, and pondered this, the way the names returned upon themselves, closing the circle they had formed in their progression outward and back.

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And we realized, in that pondering, how the monument spoke to the memories of the private griever. This wall of names arranged by date of death encompassed the private reality, and not the corporate enterprise, of war. That reality, for those kneeling in thought, must have been one of sequential loss, of one particular friend taken at one particular moment, over and over again until the circle closed and all who had been sent away were gathered in again.

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Even those of us who sought no particular death found ourselves reading individual names and, unbidden, imagining the places and the circumstances of their deaths. When we encountered, in the seeming randomness, a sequence of alphabetical arrangement, we knew that here were the men of a single platoon, wiped out together in a single engagement. . . .

After a long time, I walked away from the precinct of the monument and stood looking back at the milling crowd arrayed along its length, and I recalled the controversies that had surrounded its design. “A black ditch of shame,” it was called, its V-shape a reminder of the years of protest. As I weighed those objections against my own deeply-touched emotions, the thought came to me, as it had to others, that surely this memorial, of such emotional power, had put those objections finally to rest.

But had it really? The objections to the monument were, in essence, that it did not glorify the war in ways that other monuments had—the Iwo Jima Monument being one frequently-cited example. Now clearly a monument equating Vietnam with World War II, implying that the Vietnam War had been conducted for the same noble purposes, had been supported with equal fervor, had had the same import for the people and the nation—such a monument would have been a sham, a lie. But behind that call for a glorification is the assumption that a monument—any monument—should make concrete some shared idea about the thing it commemorates, that a war memorial in particular should embody some resolved way of thinking about the war it commemorates. In short, a monument should *speak*. In that sense, the objections stand unaddressed: The Vietnam monument does not speak. Indeed the designer, Maya Ying Lin, has said that she intended a monument that “would not tell you how to think” about the Vietnam War.

To feel that a monument should speak seems a reasonable opinion to hold. But what follows from it? What is incumbent upon *us* to do if we are to have monuments—and, by extension, public buildings—that speak to us? . . .

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## *The language of icons*

. . . . Buildings can communicate in at least four ways, each way in its turn being a little more meaningful and thus requiring of us a little more work of the imagination.

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On the simplest level, a building can merely denote the identity of the institution housed inside. This denotation is often done with a coat of arms or some similar iconographical device. . . .

A building can also go a little farther and attempt to say something about what this institution “does for a living.” . . .

A building can go one step farther and voice an ideology: It can propose to us what this institution means (or wants to mean) to society. . . .

The final step in this progression is the building that propounds to us an aspiration that exists apart from an institutional “owner.” In such a situation the building talks not only about the role an institution plays in society, but also about how society itself ought ideally to be organized, the ideas which ought ideally to govern society’s operation. . . .

## *Repaying the imagination*

But buildings only rarely get the chance to speak about the whole of society. This propounding of cultural ideals is more often the province of monuments. Take, for example, the Virginia War Memorial to the dead of the World Wars, which stands on a bluff above the James, the great river that traverses the length of the state.<sup>2</sup> The memorial has the form of a high, wide corridor, roofed and open at both ends. One flank of the corridor, on the side away from the river, is solid stone; the other is completely glass, upon which are etched the names of all those who died in the wars. Through this glass wall of names one sees a broad sweep of the James, and in the distance the state’s capital city. Set in the floor at the base of this glass wall are relics from each of the battles: a canteen from Chateau-Thierry, a shell casing from Iwo Jima, a bayonet from Normandy—the common equipment of common soldiers. Looking up from that detritus of war through the screen of names at the great river of the state, one again realizes that

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<sup>2</sup> To view and learn more about this monument, see [www.vawarmemorial.org/VAWM/default.aspx](http://www.vawarmemorial.org/VAWM/default.aspx).

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these people went to faraway places so that we, standing here, might continue to have and enjoy this beautiful land.

The memorial thus tells us not just *that* these people died, or even how or where they died. It offers us a reason *why* they died. To each of us who either feels the loss of a loved one or contemplates such a loss, it offers a pattern into which that loss can be fit and so made sense of and more easily lived with. That pattern does not take the form of a recounting of the facts of the war: We know, intellectually, the real nature of wars, just as we know the real nature of life in a university or of reporting in a newspaper. The pattern is, rather, an ideal about wars and sacrifice—an ideal state of affairs which daily reality will always fall short of, but which can serve as a standard, a yardstick upon which each remembered occurrence, in its near or far distance from the ideal, can be arrayed and so be felt to have a place, contributing in large or small measure to the attainment of that ideal.

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I cite this particular monument not because it is so distinguished (it is not) but because its message is so readily accessible to our ordinary understanding. It requires no esoteric knowledge, no difficult research for us to grasp and then to feel what is being symbolized here, only our common knowledge and our active imagination. But also required is that there be a graspable message there that *repays* imagination. When we think of recent monuments or memorials or public sculpture, the memory that most often comes to mind is not the experience of imaginative revelation but an opaque frustration. Recent public memorials and sculpture seem so often to take the form of abstract objects or minimalist shapes. We have all confronted such objects, and try as we might—staring long at them, walking slowly around or through them—our imagination draws a blank. We might notice an interesting pattern of shadows or a piquant play of shapes, but those impressions seem such meager fare, insufficient repayment for our efforts of imagination.

Take, for example, the monument erected in Dallas to commemorate the assassination of President Kennedy—a large hollow cube lifted off the ground and open to the sky, with a vertical slit cut out of the center of two opposite sides.<sup>3</sup> We enter in through those slits, feel the enclosure and the sky, see the narrowed views of the scene where the murder took place. But nothing re-tells us of the terrible feelings we all shared on that day. There is no offered pattern by which we might make sense of those feelings, or draw some lesson or guidance or even solace from the events of that day. The monument, for all of

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<sup>3</sup> To view and learn more about this monument, see <http://www.jfk.org/go/about/history-of-the-john-f-kennedy-memorial-plaza>.

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its memorializing intentions, does not seem to be about the assassination of a President but about the feeling of enclosed space and the play of light on hard surfaces. The speaking it does is addressed not to our minds and hearts but to our bodies and eyes. . . .

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. . . . What monuments have traditionally done is embody an idea important to those who erected them. That is what Jefferson did with his idea of an ideal academic society, and what the builders of the Virginia War Memorial did for their ideas of war and sacrifice. But a monument endures beyond its time, holds that idea before us, in our time, and asks us to contemplate that idea—turn it over in our heads, stand it next to our own experiences and ask if it still applies. Do people and institutions act as they do out of allegiance to this idea? And if they do, do I want people and institutions to keep on doing those things? Do I want them to do those things out of allegiance to this idea, knowing what that might entail? And if people and institutions do not act in accord with this idea, would I wish them to? In short: Do I want this idea, and all it might entail, to be an operative force in our society?

Monuments confront us with that choice. They tell us that people like ourselves once chose to affirm a certain set of ideals, but in that telling, they remind us that we too must face the decision of which ideals to affirm. Monuments thus set before us the task of reassessing our values. And they do it by giving us both the means to criticize and the reason for doing so. By asking us to contemplate imaginatively the ideas they embody, monuments prod us to think through the implications of our social ideals. Through the free contemplation which they engender, we can know an idea more wholly—see more clearly and feel more deeply both the dangers and the glories to which it might lead. In that sensing of both danger and glory we have a surer means, a firmer basis for judging.

But in that sensing we also feel, if we are alive to it, the evanescence of an idea. For to sense the consequences of an idea is to realize that those consequences can only come to pass through our actions. And to realize *that* is to realize that, without our taking action, ideas engender nothing. Monuments tell us that the moment we become unwilling to do the actions that an idea entails, at that moment the idea dies: It becomes a “form,” a thing to be paid lip service, or a target of cynicism.

In this call to contemplation and action, monuments put before us the task of keeping our values and aspirations aligned with our desires and needs. When such monuments

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stand among us, they act as a counter to the expedience that can so dominate our daily lives—not as a goad, but as a call to hold on only to those values and aspirations whose consequences we freely choose to bear. In this very real sense, then, monuments call us to keep ourselves free: free from the demagoguery of ideas whose consequences we could not support, free from the brutish life of sheer expedience.

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That is a very real necessity for monuments. And that is an equally real necessity for building that bespeak the nature of the institutions they house. A public environment that articulates ideas is an environment that lets us know which ideas we must support and, sometimes, which ideas we must contend against.

## *Living with our ideals*

I did not quite finish my story of the Virginia War Memorial. A few years ago that memorial was extended, to include relics of the battles of Vietnam and the names of those Virginians who died there. Looking now, out through *those* names at the green banks of the James, a question arises: Did these soldiers really die that we might continue to have and enjoy this great land? And the answer, which we cannot avoid, is: No, they did not. But within that answer lies the true question to be asked: Is the defense of this land the *only* justification we will accept for sending young men and women to death in faraway places?

I am certain of the necessity for asking that question, continually and repeatedly throughout all our lives. But I am just as certain that I do not have the wisdom to frame an answer. Aided so far only by words, we have not been able to find an answer we can share. Perhaps if we could open ourselves to the kinds of thoughts that monuments can engender, our imaginations could supply an answer we could live with—and live by.

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