

Veterans Day is for Remembering

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Veterans Day is an occasion to pause and do what we should do everyday -- remember those who have served and sacrificed. This year, coming on the heels of a national election, we also need to resolve to address some tasks ahead.

The president and Congress will need to determine just how to draw down our forces in Afghanistan. They must define the nation's *military* objectives for those forces who will serve there over the next two years. They must also do far more to support those who return.

This is also time to consider how the United States will remember those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan -- and memorialize the now more than 6,600 who have died in those two wars. These veterans themselves and the families of those who were lost should have the primary voice in determining the form of national memory.

The form and voice of memorializing have varied significantly over the years. Following WW I there was a great emphasis on "living memory" -- public facilities and infrastructure. Since WW II the focus has been more on physical memorials -- but each of the three national memorials completed in this period has had a quite different theme.

This Veterans Day we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall. Today the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a national treasure, visited by over three million people annually. In 1979 Jan Scruggs, a Vietnam veteran, proposed a memorial honoring those who had sacrificed there. It moved forward remarkably quickly and in 1982 it was dedicated. But quickly does not mean it moved easily: 30 years ago critics found it somber and unheroic. Ross Perot led criticism of the memorial and Tom Wolfe wrote in the *Washington Post* that the memorial was "a tribute to Jane Fonda" and to antiwar activism.

The Vietnam Memorial broke from the iconic, heroic, memorial pattern by remembering the individual lives that were lost. Of course most local monuments dating from the 19th century featured the names of those who had been lost in the wars. For many in 1982 the model of the ideal memorial was the Marine Corps Memorial a few miles away in Arlington, a Felix de Weldon statue based upon the Joe Rosenthal photograph of the Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima in 1945.

This Marine Corps Memorial did not mention the 22,000 Marine casualties on the island -- including 6,000 dead. It did not indicate that three of the six men raising the flag later died on Iwo Jima. Critics of the Maya Lin design persuaded Secretary of the Interior James Watt to approve the Vietnam Memorial only upon the condition that the site would also include a statue and an American flag. Frederick Hart who created the "Three Infantrymen" statue had studied with de Weldon.

In the early 1980s some Korean War veterans proposed a memorial for their forgotten war. In 1986 Congress approved fundraising for a site on the Mall, across from the Vietnam Memorial. General Joseph Stillwell was the chair of the group of veterans who planned memorial. He did not live to participate in its dedication in 1995. The Korean War veterans sought to remember all who had served, as well as the 36,000 who had died in that theater. Col William Weber, a leader of the Korean Veterans group, said "It's not a memorial of grief. It's a memorial of pride." Black granite walls display sandblasted images of men serving in Korea. The memorial features nineteen figures walking through a field. Their expressions show the faces of men in combat. The wall at the end of this grouping memorializes those who died in that war. Currently there is sentiment on the part of many Korean War veterans to add the individual names of the fallen at the site.

The last of the three modern war memorials created is that of WWII. It is ironic that it was the last completed given that it was the first war -- and it was of a scale that finally engaged nearly all Americans and was concluded with a clear sense of victory. In 1987 Roger Durbin a veteran of the Battle of the Bulge proposed a memorial to the war. It took six years for Congress to authorize the memorial and 17 years to complete it. Durbin did not live to see the memorial. Neither did eleven million other WW II veterans. At the groundbreaking for the Memorial, war hero Senator Bob Dole said his generation was moving "from the shade to the shadows."

The WW II Memorial is more traditional than the other two post war memorials on the Mall. The Vietnam Memorial honors sacrifice and the Korean War Memorial evokes the experience of war. The WW II memorial records the triumph of democracy. It remembers successful campaigns and victories. Four thousand gold stars, each representing 1,000 Americans who died, symbolize the cost of those victories.

This Veterans Day is a good time to initiate a conversation about a memorial to those veterans who have fought our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, our longest wars. We still do not have a monument to WWI and its 53,000 battle deaths. The last living veteran of WWI, Frank Buckles, hoped to see such a memorial. He died in February 2011. We can do better than this. Jan Scruggs and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund intend to honor these latest comrades in the interim in the new Education Center.

Iraq and Afghanistan veterans need to tell us how they want our nation to remember their wars and how to memorialize those who died in these conflicts. There is no clear model. And perhaps they will want to move beyond granite and marble. But the human face of these wars needs to become part of our nation's memory -- wars do have real human costs. Forgetting wars is bad history. Forgetting sacrifice is irresponsible history.

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