

At War with Memory: National versus Local Interpretations of Vietnam Veterans Memorials

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Abstract. Much of the literature surrounding the public memory of the Vietnam War focuses exclusively on the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., creating the impression that all Vietnam memorials carry the same message of a bitter war and entrenched in public debate. However, this narrow scope excludes smaller memorials created by individual cities for local soldiers.

The difference between national and local war memorials produces significant variations in meaning, motivation, and public perception. A continuing issue facing war memorials are the changes in visitors and how to convey the meaning to new generations. Though built at approximately the same time, the Winfield Vietnam Veterans Memorial stands as a counter-point to the national dialog created by the Washington D.C. monument. By ignoring other facets of Vietnam remembrance, a complete survey of public memory, or even opinion, cannot be concluded.

1. Introduction

Local war memorials, such as the Winfield Vietnam Veterans Memorial, function as a counterpoint to national monuments. These individual tributes to local citizens can have a vastly different viewpoint than their national counterparts and help to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the public memory and history. The locality of the monuments and close ties to the community seem to produce a desire to remember a neighbor more than a conflicted war. However, a major issue facing both memorials is how to continually convey the meaning and significance of the Vietnam veterans' contributions to younger generations. The public's role in shaping this new shared memory varies from Washington D.C. to Winfield, although both memorials are currently in a similar time of transition.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

The main focus of the research was to discover differences in meaning when comparing national war memorials to local versions. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was chosen to highlight differences in meaning between the replica in Winfield and the original in Washington, D.C. Although similar in appearance, the stories behind the memorials differed because of the public's reaction to the projects. The local connections helped the Winfield memorial to secure funding quicker and were met with less resistance when compared to the National memorial. However, as younger generations are more distantly related to the people named on the memorial walls it is becoming more difficult to convey the same message. The public is beginning to take an active role in both forming a shared memory and creating new methods of memorializing. This change in public memory has greatly altered the meaning of the memorial in Winfield from its original intent while the national memorial seemed better able to adapt to future interpretations due to its non-specific nature.

3. Conclusions

To fully understand a Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it must be viewed both as a structure and through the visitor interactions. Not all memorials are created with the same intent, which can drastically change their design and perception; these various aspects play a role in the public memory, discussion, and remembrance of the Vietnam War. Memorials play a significant role in the creation of public memory and describe the attitude of the society which created them.

4. Acknowledgment

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5. References

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