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Vietnam Memorial

The Vietnam Memorial is one of the most famous and praised memorials that can be found in Washington D.C. This is part from the seemingly simplistic structure that is rich in symbolism, and the sheer scale of the tragedy. This memorial was key to unlocking the idea of veteran support because the initial reaction to the war and as a result the veterans were sour.

Ending in 1973, the Vietnam war lasted a decade with no sides having a clear victory. About 3 million served including men and women. Although the women did not partake in the combat, they were integral to providing aid and support. Of the 3 million 150,000 were injured and 58,220 lost their lives in the war.

“Efforts to get the wall built in 1979. It was opened to the public three years later” (Lange). The article later talks about how unprecedented it is to get a monument to be built this quickly. However, that was not without pushback, “Congressional hearings to get it done were the easy part. The struggle came from opponents who thought it was controversial as a work of art” (Lange). The problem more specifically, was that it was a black granite – a stark difference to the prestigious white that the capital boasts. Congress pushed back on this saying the color was to condemn all war and be a “black” smudge on the pristineness of the United States. However, the black granite was selected not only for its reflective quality but also for its durability and solemn appearance. The color black was intended to convey a somber and reflective tone, appropriate for honoring those who sacrificed their lives. The two sides compromised adding a statue of three soldiers looking over the monument.

The memorial was designed by Maya Lin and has many hidden meanings and symbols. Besides the reflective black granite, the memorial is shaped like a “V” slowly descending into the ground. The “V” is supposed to be a physical symbol for Vietnam, with each end of the “V” point towards the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument which connects Vietnam’s sacrifices to broader American history. As visitors walk along the monument, they slowly sink into the ground symbolizing mourning, humility, reflection on loss, and the permanent scar the war left on the public. The visitor is encouraged to start at the base and move along one of the sides, with the names of the people who died listed in chronological order. The names wrap around the entire monument with the people who died at the very beginning of the war engraved right next to those who died last, signifying the very circular nature of war and the little progress that it made. Over the years three women were added to the memorial to pay tribute to the thousands of women who helped the war effort.

Many of those who have lost loved ones and friends come to this site to find the names of their respective people. They typically bring flowers, dog-tags or letters. Others engage in the practice of tracing names onto paper, creating personal mementos and honoring the service of individuals who may otherwise remain distant in memory. Learning about this memorial was a reminder of how costly wars can become.

Works Cited:

Lange, Katie. "Remembering Vietnam: The Story Behind 'The Wall.'" *U.S. Department of Defense*, 28 Mar. 2022, www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/2979448/remembering-vietnam-the-story-behind-the-wall/. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.