

Remembering Vietnam

New York Times (1923-Current file); May 18, 1981; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. A18

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Commemorating war dead in art is a rite as old as memory and mourning, so it was inevitable that there would be a competition for a Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. The winning design, by Maya Ying Lin, a Yale architecture student, is for a low, angled wall inscribed with names, to be built between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. The horizontal lines, the simple geometry and the somber stone create a mood that is sober and eternal.

The Vietnam war is not easy to memorialize; even the competition was protested by some who also protested against the war, and the monument is likely to remain a controversial site for some time to come.

But the controversy reflects more than bitterness left over from the war. It used to be much simpler to build a monument. The roll of honor on bronze tablets, or the statue of the fallen warrior holding a flag ap-

peared predictably on the village green. Anonymous generals and unknown soldiers furnish innumerable traffic islands. Forgotten heroes dot the nation's parks. The uniforms change, the heroes sit or stand or occasionally ride a horse, but the message remains the same: a noble cause well served.

Nowadays, though, patriotism is a complicated matter. Ideas about heroism, or art, for that matter, are no longer what they were before Vietnam. And there is certainly no consensus yet about what cause might have been served by the Vietnam War.

But perhaps that is why the V-shaped, black granite lines merging gently with the sloping earth make the winning design seem a lasting and appropriate image of dignity and sadness. It conveys the only point about the war on which people may agree: that those who died should be remembered.

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