

# Memory, Myth, and The National Mall

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*If any question why we died, tell them, because our fathers lied.*

—Rudyard Kipling

*You can't stop me. I spend 30,000 men a month.*

—Napoleon

*Patriots always talk of dying for their country but never of killing for their country.*

—Bertrand Russell

*The past isn't dead. It is not even past.*

—William Faulkner

Alzheimer's disease—the plague of forgetfulness—has become America's eighth-leading cause of death, having increased 220 percent from 1994 to 2003 (Lin 2006). Researchers estimate that 3 to 5 million Americans suffer from it and predict that from 9 to 16 million will by 2050 (Associated Press 2007). Some attribute its increase to changes in reporting and better diagnosis. Others say that an expanding senior population—due to people living longer than ever before—is closely linked to the growing number of people afflicted with this disorder. At age 65, a person has a one in ten chance of contracting Alzheimer's; by 85, those chances increase to one in two. Certainly, an aging population is a major factor. But why *this particular population*?

A psychologist friend of mine has worked at veterans hospitals his entire career, mostly with Vietnam vets. In the mid-1980s, he noticed a new phenomenon: Large numbers of World War II vets were requiring psychotherapy, most for the first time.

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(Photograph: Raul654, June 23, 2004, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:DC\\_mall\\_capitol.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:DC_mall_capitol.jpg))

*The National Mall in Washington, D.C., viewed from the U.S. Capitol Building and facing the Washington Monument—the obelisk in the distance. A monument to Ulysses S. Grant is in the nearground, depicted riding a horse and facing the Washington Monument. Both Washington and Grant were army generals: Washington was the commander of the Revolutionary Army, which won independence from the British, and Ulysses S. Grant was the commander of the Union Army, which defeated the secessionist southern states (the Confederacy) in the late nineteenth-century U.S. Civil War. Washington became the first president of the United States, and Grant was elected president following the Civil War.*

The timing was curious. Their war had been over for two generations. It was the last “good war,” a crusade that had liberated enslaved Europe and Asia. They had *won* their war and had returned as heroes, having lived out, as cultural historian Fred Turner writes, “the masculine prescriptions of American mythology” (1996, 150). But in general, unlike the vets of the next generation, they hadn’t spoken much about their war, except amongst themselves. And they’d returned to a bustling economy, to which most had contributed forty years of productive engagement. They’d worked hard, very hard. Having bought homes, raised families, and served their communities, they were now contemplating or experiencing well-deserved retirement.

Perhaps some had worked so hard in order to keep their minds on positive things—and to avoid memories of D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge, Iwo Jima, or Guadalcanal. In fact, 20 to 30 percent of their nonfatal casualties had been psychiatric; over 500,000 had been sent home with *battle fatigue* (previously known as *shell shock*) (Marlowe 2001). My friend theorized that they were seeking treatment because for the first time they *had* time, too much of it, and the old memories were flooding their minds. It was a mass case of “the return of the repressed.” Another therapist who has worked extensively with trauma victims, Dr. Judith Herman, professor at Harvard Medical School, writes, “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (Sturken 1997, 81).

The timing was curious for several reasons. Just as Alzheimer's was first attaining the status of household word, President Ronald Reagan was pursuing four very public initiatives to influence the attitudes and beliefs of Americans. First, he was encouraging white males to perceive themselves as victims of liberals, feminists, and big government. Second, he was scaring the hell out of the nation with apocalyptic scenarios of communism and nuclear war that, if played out, would destroy everything the old men had worked for. Third, he was skillfully articulating the national myth of innocence:

By the time I got out of the Army Air Corps, all I wanted to do—in common with several million other veterans—was to rest up awhile, make love to my wife, and come up refreshed to a better job in an ideal world. (Reagan with Hubler 1965, 112–121, 138)

Reagan, who had remained in Hollywood during World War II, insisted that he'd personally photographed the liberation of Nazi death camps.<sup>1</sup> It was a unique form of memory, composed of scenes from movies Reagan had *watched*, movies of black-and-white morality in which Americans (*white* Americans) were clearly the good guys.

Having just endured two decades of urban rebellion and offensives to public morality, many World War II vets were undoubtedly happy to watch Reagan confuse memory and myth—while pursuing his fourth initiative. A decade after the end of the Vietnam War, America was once again extending itself, claiming to defend democracy in Central America and the Middle East. To do so, however, the administration needed to reverse the *Vietnam Syndrome* of public disgust at military intervention.<sup>2</sup>

The timing was also curious because, following the new popularity of Civil War battle reenactments, people had recently begun to reenact World War II battles. The nation had finally begun discussing AIDS. Millions of Americans were deeply concerned about prisoners of war allegedly being held by Vietnam. For instance, a 1991 poll showed that 69 percent of Americans believed that American POWs were still being held in Southeast Asia (Turner 1996, 118–119). Between four and ten million had worn POW/MIA bracelets, vowing never to remove them until all Americans were accounted for.<sup>3</sup>

Hollywood was producing immensely popular revenge fantasies. *Rambo—First Blood, Part I* had been released in 1982 and *Part II* (in which Rambo asks, “Do we get to win this time?”) in 1985. Eventually, over a dozen such films featured American prisoners of war, the most recent being Werner Herzog's *Rescue Dawn*, which was released last July (2007). Several of the films inverted history to portray Americans being tortured by bloodthirsty Vietnamese. “Rescuing POW's from the evil Vietnamese Communists,” wrote professor H. Bruce Franklin, “now became almost a rite of passage for Hollywood heroes...” (Franklin 1993, 156). Meanwhile, an estimated one million men were reading *Soldier of Fortune Magazine* (Turner 1996, 84).

Vietnam vets were speaking for the first time about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was not included in American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic*

and *Statistical Manual* as a legitimate mental condition until 1980. And countless civilians were publicly confronting childhood trauma in the *recovered memory* movement (called *false memory* by its detractors).<sup>4</sup> Memory was in the air, even as many old vets were losing theirs.

The timing was curious because—after tremendous public controversy—the Vietnam War Memorial had been finally dedicated on Washington's National Mall in late 1982. And only after the opening of the Memorial were the Vietnam vets receiving Welcome Home parades.

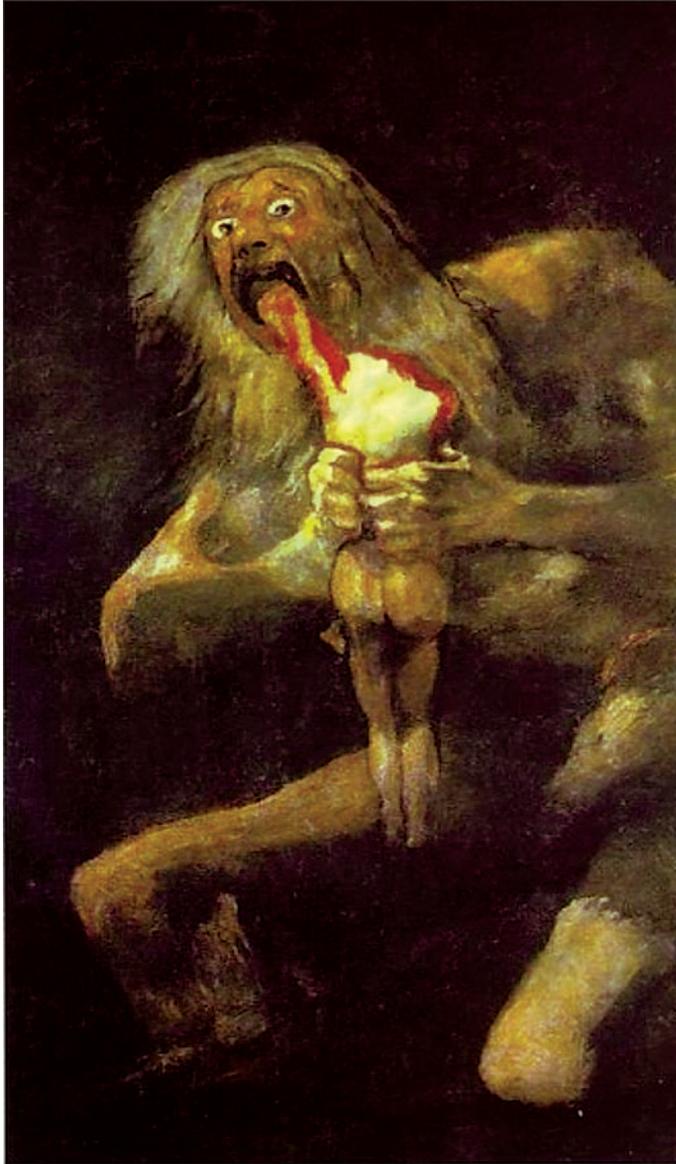
Time, in the form of retirement—otherwise known as *mandated uselessness*—had caught up with the World War II generation. With *time on their hands*, many could no longer hold back the flood of war memories and were finally acknowledging that they needed help. Perhaps, at some level, others found a different solution: Alzheimer's wiped away the terrible images forever. But this blessing came with its own special curse. When *Mnemosyne*, the goddess of memory, departs, what remains in awareness is up to her, not to us. Allowing the bad memories to slip away, the old men lost many good ones as well. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke had once feared, losing one's demons also risks the loss of one's angels.

Although researchers search for an organic cause for Alzheimer's, might it be, in part, a response to the challenge of the return of the repressed? Or, as mythologist Michael Meade has suggested, when a culture forgets its elders, the elders forget themselves? The old men had spent their lives being productive, and now they were being cast aside to gated communities and golf courses, or worse, to old-age homes.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we may imagine the sudden rise in the incidence of Alzheimer's as a metaphor for national denial and the perpetuation of myth. The myth of American innocence is a story we tell ourselves about ourselves. It reconciles the contradictions between our ideals of democracy, freedom, and opportunity, and the realities of racism and empire. This myth allows us, encourages us, to forget.

## Myth

The men who survived World War II share a particular relationship with the veterans of the Vietnam War. They are *fathers and sons*. In Greek myth *Ouranos* (Heaven) first ruled the universe. But he never felt secure, due to a prophecy that one of his children would overthrow him. So one by one, he rejected them as they were born, pushing them back into the body of his wife, *Gaia*, Mother Earth. Enraged, Gaia helped one son escape. When *Ouranos* came to mate with her, *Chronos* emerged and castrated him. But the rebellion of *Chronos* and his siblings—the *Titans*—merely resulted in more tyranny. *Chronos*, now king of Heaven, also received a prophecy that a son would overthrow him. So this god *ate* his children as they were born. *Chronos* (in Latin, Saturn) personifies



*Saturn [Chronos] Devouring One of His Sons, 1821–1823, by Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828) (Oil on canvas, 146 × 83 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain)*

Time, which devours all things.<sup>6</sup> One of his sisters was Mnemosyne, Memory, who carries the oldest stories of all, told from Gaiā's perspective. His wife Rhea, however, bore a son in secret. Zeus grew to adulthood, freed his siblings, defeated and banished his father, and established the heavenly order of the Greek cosmos.

Ouranos and Chronos are the original patriarchal fathers, the distant gods of the sky. Their stories set the stage for generational conflicts that have been literalized for thousands of years. And they provide the ancient—and modern—worlds with two extreme psychological patterns of fathering. Ouranos, escaping to the sky, is the classic absent father: gone, divorced, uninvolved, alcoholic, or merely hidden behind the newspaper, dismissing his children with, “Go ask your mother.” Chronos, on the other hand, is *overly* involved: critical, tyrannical, judgmental, loud, narcissistic, abusive, predatory, invader of psychological and sexual boundaries, and sometimes murderous.

Greece is one source of the Western tradition; the Middle East is the other. The Hebrews evolved a body of myth in which the primary image of the father-child relationship is marked by the constant threat of sacrifice. Jehovah’s potential wrath always hangs over the heads of the Israelites. When Phineas murders a Hebrew prince for sleeping with a pagan woman (he murders her as well), God is pleased: “Phineas turned my wrath away . . . he was zealous for my sake, so that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy” (Num 25:11). The father would have killed all of his children



The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1590, by Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio (Canvas, 104 × 135 cm. Uffizi, Florence, Italy)

because of one's indiscretion. Escaping Sodom, Lot offers the mob his two virgin daughters to "do ye to them as is good in your eyes" (Gen. 19:8). In the best-known story, Abraham—father of Judeo-Christian-Moslem monotheism—is willing to sacrifice Isaac to appease Jehovah.

*The most fundamental theme in Western culture* is firmly established when Jehovah abandons *his* only son. Indeed, when Jesus cries, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" he is quoting from Psalm 22, which was already hundreds of years old at the time. He gives voice to the ancient trauma caused by abuse, abandonment, and betrayal that often results in profound depression—or the unquenchable desire to hurt someone. The theme had already entered the Gospel story. Herod, having heard of Jesus' birth, orders the murder of all boys two years and younger in the Bethlehem region (Matt. 2:16). Here Hebrew and Greek myths intersect: Patriarchs, fearful of rivals among their subjects or children, pursue the most terrible of initiations, killing the innocent. Many of the survivors become killers themselves or subject their own children to the same abuses.

And Time—*Chronos*—crushes all memory of other possibilities. Wilfred Owen wrote "The Parable of the Young Man and the Old" from the trenches of northern France in 1918:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
 And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
 And as they sojourned, both of them together,  
 Isaac the first-born spake, and said, My Father,  
 Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
 But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?  
 Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
 And builded parapets and trenches there,  
 And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.  
 When lo! An angel called him out of heaven,  
 Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
 Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
 A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
 Offer the Ram of Pride instead.  
 But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
 And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

(1965, 42)

Chronos was still alive and well in the 1960s. The final scene of the 1979 movie *Hair* says it all: The protagonist reluctantly disappears—*swallowed*—by the black, gaping maw of a giant C-130 troop transport. He is bound, with three million other sons—and several thousand daughters—of the World War II vets, for Vietnam. There, an ancient drama was enacted on a massive scale: the betrayal of the children.



*The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1635, by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (Canvas, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia)*

## Realities: Vietnam

Fathers—so myth tells us—have always sacrificed sons in war. But Vietnam marked a significant shift. Between 1945 and 1965, a fundamental change occurred in military culture. The officer corps became permeated, write Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, by

a set of values, practices and policies that forced considerations of career advancement to figure more heavily in the behavior of individual officers . . . (it was) rooted in the entrepreneurial model of the modern business corporation. (178, 17–18)<sup>7</sup>

These changes produced officers who were ambitious, aloof, transitory (serving “in country” only six months instead of the full year endured by the “grunts”) and only

marginally skilled. Above all, they were determined to produce efficient, if often completely bogus, results and to cover up any problems so as to keep their record clean. They were middle-tier managers who manipulated short-term statistics. Foot soldiers quickly perceived that their superiors cared little for their safety and that their demands were illegitimate.

In Vietnam success was measured for the first time in terms of the *body count* rather than in conquered real estate. And the army's primary tactic—"search and destroy"—was the *sacrifice* of infantry units in order to flush out the concealed enemy. This tactic was also called *target acquisition*. Helicopters dropped troops intentionally into *hot zones*, where they were pinned down by enemy fire. They suffered until air strikes hit the enemy positions, and then the survivors *left* the terrain to the enemy's survivors. Sociologist William Gibson writes, "Story after story . . . concerns commanders who knew large enemy formations were in a given area, but did not tell their subordinates because they did not want them to be cautious" (2000, 111).

Abandonment and betrayal became the primary metaphors for hundreds of thousands of Americans. Psychologist Jonathan Shay quotes one veteran: "The U.S. Army . . . was like a mother who sold out her kids to be raped by (their) father . . ." (1994/1995, 5). The soldier's common experience, says Shay, was violation of the moral order, or betrayal.

We can easily forget that Vietnam was *a children's war*. This war was fought not by reservists or the National Guard (as in Iraq) but by teenage (disproportionately African American or Latino) draftees. One of every two Hispanics, for example, served in a combat unit, and one in five were killed. Corresponding percentages for whites were much lower (Sturken 1997, 114). Their *median* age was 19: For every 21-year-old, there was a 17-year-old. Lyndon Johnson chose to maximize support by minimizing its impact on older citizens (Males 1996, 266). And there were few domestic sacrifices such as increased taxes; thus the war's debt fell on future generations. Nearly half of Americans who died had been sent to Vietnam as teenagers; 14,000 died in combat before their 21st birthdays. On the other side, 40 percent of those killed by American incendiary and antipersonnel bombs were children. And because dioxin (the active ingredient in Agent Orange) remains in the body's DNA, 35,000 Vietnamese babies are born with birth defects annually.

As noted, in World War II a third of American casualties had been psychiatric. But in Vietnam, due to dominant psychological theories of the day, fewer than 5 percent were. Shay comments:

We now know that this low rate did not reflect the true incidence of major psychological injury . . . The official diagnostic manual of the time did not even have a category for what prior generations had called "shell shock" or "combat neurosis." (1994/1995, 203–204)

Thus, with a bureaucratic adjustment, the Fathers decided that men whose souls had been broken by the terrors of combat simply didn't exist.

And the Fathers knew something else: World War II studies had shown that only 15 to 20 percent of frontline riflemen fired their weapon at exposed enemy soldiers (Marshall 1946/1948). Fear of *killing*, not of being killed, had been the most common cause of battle fatigue. Something in the soul had survived that still insisted upon fundamental mutuality with the Other. Having learned this, the Fathers responded with what Colonel David Grossman has termed “a new, evolutionary leap in the conditioning of the mind.” Psychologists introduced methods of desensitization and conditioning that taught soldiers to “respond reflexively even when literally frightened out of their wits” (2000). This method, writes Grossman, was “psychological warfare conducted not upon the enemy, but upon one’s own troops” (Dobie 2005, 38). By the Korean War, firing rates were up to 55 percent—and 95 percent in Vietnam.

Survivors of Vietnam suffered two unique injustices. Larger numbers of them than in any previous war had to confront the reality that they had actually killed other human beings (MacNair 2002).<sup>8</sup> They were in an ambiguous situation, wrote Peter Marin: “. . . the agents and the victims of a particular kind of violence. That is the source of a pain that almost no one else can understand” (Sturken 1997, 66). And when they broke down emotionally, their fathers’ generation ignored them. Indeed—for their own reasons—officers looked the other way when soldiers took out their rage upon civilians in countless incidents of atrocity or upon themselves in suicide and drug addiction. Eight thousand died from “friendly fire” (Wikipedia).<sup>9</sup> Over 20 percent tried heroin, and 11 percent were regular users (McCoy 1972, 221). By 1971, 90,000 had deserted (Faludi 1999, 337). Many took it out on their superiors: 20 percent of officers who died were *fragged*—assassinated by their own men (126).

Thousands of veterans joined—and became leaders of—the antiwar movement, hoping to shake the nation out of its denial, hoping Americans would remember their own ideals. When they brought the shameful massacre of My Lai to the public’s attention, however, the nation—and the doctors—turned away. The 1968 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* had dropped “gross stress reaction” as a type of war neurosis. As a result, when one veteran who had been present at My Lai told VA psychiatrists of his nightmares and fears, they dismissed his stories as delusion and classified him as paranoid schizophrenic (Lembcke 1998, 105).

“The threat My Lai posed to both national myth and individual civilian’s psychic security,” writes Turner, “can be measured by the variety of ways Americans found to deflect and deny its importance.” George Wallace growled, “Any atrocities in this war were caused by the Communists” (1996, 41–42). Following a brief flurry of outrage, most Americans agreed that My Lai was an anomaly or even a fabrication. Polls found that 80 percent opposed (Lieutenant William) Calley’s guilty verdict (Faludi 1999, 347).

“Our boys” would never do such things. Or only if they were sick: In subsequent years, blaming a few “mad” veterans for crimes that in a greater sense the nation as a

whole was responsible for became common. Such thinking served to help Americans forget a “terrifying chain of metaphorical logic.” Turner writes:

If these soldiers had behaved like the German soldiers of World War II, then perhaps their commanders were Nazis and we at home were “good Germans.” If they were simply “crazy,” then perhaps they alone were responsible for the killings. (1996, 41–42)

The trauma of the Vietnam veterans was complicated by their sense of betrayal. Most returned to their urban streets and small towns *alone*, mere days after being in the field. There, as we know, many were treated disrespectfully—but not, as it turns out, by antiwar protestors. After exhaustive research, sociologist and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke concludes that the spitters and hecklers touted by the media were hawkish veterans of World War II, who regarded the young men as losers. It was their *fathers*—in hundreds of VFW and American Legion posts scattered across small-town America—who were attacking the Vietnam vets (1998, 54). One World War II vet observed an antiwar march and snarled, “. . . we won our war, they didn’t; and from the looks of them, they couldn’t.” At another rally, a Vietnam vet read the names of Texas men killed in the war, while (reported by *Life* magazine) pro-war hecklers yelled, “Spit at those people, spit on ‘em” (58, 77). Turner quotes a Korean War vet, as recently as 1992: “I can’t understand these Vietnam guys. They’re always crying. When we came home, we kept it to ourselves and did what we had to do” (1996, 197). Turner also reports that forty years after Korea, this same vet’s children fear his repeated flashbacks.

Lembcke concludes that the Nixon White House deliberately disseminated the “myth of the spat-upon veteran” in order to counter the fact that the Vietnam veterans were actually among the leaders of the antiwar movement. By 1970, a major argument for continuing the war was to protect the troops who were already there—and to free those who were allegedly held captive by the North Vietnamese. Similarly, Bruce Franklin argues that, following the cataclysmic year of 1968, Nixon deliberately introduced the issue of the issue of the MIA/POWs to evoke strong emotional support for a war that was becoming universally unpopular. Within four years, over fifty million bumper stickers were sold. The killing of the children, however, continued (Franklin 1993, 48).<sup>10</sup>

The madness went underground but eventually resurfaced. By the 1990s, more than 40 percent of Vietnam combat veterans—at least 300,000 men—had reported engaging in violent acts 3 or more times in the previous year, giving rise to the media stereotype of the deranged Vietnam veteran. Thirty-six percent, 250,000 men (some put the number at 1.4 million), met all criteria for PTSD (Shay 1994/1995, 98, 168). The illness was most prevalent among those who engaged in ground combat over short distances—the men who overrode their reluctance to kill. By contrast, those officers who flew the B-52s were not similarly affected: They killed from four miles up and never saw the results. In 2005, 161,000 were receiving disability compensation for PTSD-related symptoms. *By 1998, over 100,000 Vietnam veterans had committed suicide* (Tick 2005, 165).<sup>11</sup>

At least one-third of homeless males are Vietnam-era combat veterans—on any given night, 150,000 to 250,000 (Tick 2005, 179). Shay has spent his career tending to them, and he acknowledges that all veterans suffer maladies such as inappropriate hypervigilance. But he argues, “A soldier’s trust in his own perceptions and cognitions usually recovers spontaneously upon return to civilian life, *unless the soldier has also experienced major betrayals* by his own leaders” (1994/1995, 170).

## Betrayals: Myth and Reality

Betrayal invites us back into the realm of myth. Commentators in the 1960s often dismissed the “generation gap” as Oedipal rage. But if young people dreamed of patricide, it was directed against Chronos’ insatiable appetite for his own children. After all, hadn’t oracles warned Uranos, Chronos, and even Zeus that their children would overthrow them? Isn’t that fear at the root of the patriarch’s reign of terror? Two myths intersected. The dream of the hero’s journey crashed against a nightmare, the refusal to anoint the new kings and queens of the world.

The generation who had survived the Depression, saved Europe from the Nazis, and consumed both material gratification and the myth of innocent intentions couldn’t possibly understand. Hardening in their resistance, they claimed, *My country—right or wrong!* But the youth, who always see mythic issues more clearly, chanted, *Hey, hey, LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?*

By 1970, after a decade of upheaval, middle-class Americans were exhausted, disenchanted, and vulnerable to reactionary backlash. Hollywood saw the opening and responded with urban vigilante movies starring Charles Bronson and Clint Eastwood, movies in which lone (white) redeemer-heroes violently cleaned up the urban chaos. Many in the working class, who had struggled so hard to achieve their dreams, sensed that the students were satirizing and condemning their materialistic lifestyles and prejudices. Conservatives were quick to emphasize this fatal flaw of class difference. When the Ohio National Guard exploded at Kent State in 1970, writes historian Milton Viorst, the public was outraged at the *students*, not those who’d killed them. Many rejoiced that, “. . . the act had been done at last... the students deserved what they got” (1979, 542). In the weeks after the killings, many locals greeted each other by holding up four fingers signifying, “We got four of them.” A prosecutor stated publicly that all the troublemakers should have been shot. James Michener reported that a “depressing” number of Kent State students were told by their parents that they, too, should have been shot (1971, 453–455).

“The act” was public—nationally televised—ritual sacrifice. Although America had been killing its children in Vietnam and in the ghettos for years, here was an unmistakable message, a hardening of the generational position: *Your purpose is to be like the fathers, or to die.* Shortly after Kent State, while students were striking at 450

campuses, construction workers attacked demonstrators as police watched and refused to intercede. Years later, after exonerating the students, Kent State commissioned a monument. However, it rejected sculptor George Segal's model of Abraham poised with a knife over Isaac.

By the year 2000, a curious dichotomy was established in the media and in public perception. The 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan* and several subsequent books identified the World War II vets as America's "greatest generation." Meanwhile, literally dozens of films inspired by *Rambo* had reduced Vietnam vets from active, idealistic anti-war protesters to violent and dysfunctional lunatics. They had become—at worst—scapegoats, psychological crucibles for the nation's doubts and misgivings about the war. Psychologist Robert Jay Lifton wrote that the vet

... has been the agent and victim of that confusion—of on the one hand our general desensitization to indiscriminate killing, and on the other our accumulating guilt and deep suspicion concerning our own actions. (Turner 1996, 53)

At best, although the legitimization of PTSD was enormously important for the treatment of thousands of vets, Hollywood converted a political discourse into a medical one. Now, the primary victims of the war—in our memory—are not the three million Southeast Asians but American boys.

Ronald Reagan had been unable to overcome the "Vietnam Syndrome," but George H. W. Bush had more success. Aware that unrestricted media access in Vietnam had contributed to the public's disillusionment, the Pentagon severely limited the public to carefully choreographed and antiseptic images in which the Persian Gulf War recalled the familiar, mythic narrative of good intentions. By once again sacrificing themselves to "liberate" a weak country from tyranny (and then returning home whole and healthy), American soldiers seemingly established the memory of Vietnam as an aberration in our glorious history (Sturken 1997, 122–139). When it was done, even though Saddam Hussein remained in power, Bush boasted, "The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands" (Zinn 2003, 600).

In reality, *over half* of the 580,000 Gulf War veterans are now disabled—and 10,000 to 13,000 are dead (Truthout.org). Depleted uranium is the primary suspect—a substance that studies prior to the war had proven to be highly toxic. The brass was fully aware and had never warned the soldiers. Anthrax vaccine is the second.<sup>12</sup>

It is estimated that a thousand veterans of our current occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan are already homeless (Glantz 2007).<sup>13</sup> One in five—over 100,000—have been granted at least partial disability (Shane 2006). Some 45,000 have sought help for PTSD, but there is a backlog of 400,000 claims (Priest and Hull 2007).<sup>14</sup> Forty-eight percent say that they have been responsible for the death of an enemy combatant, and twenty-eight percent for the death of a *non-combatant* (Hoge et al. 2004, 13–55). However, says another therapist friend of mine, few active duty soldiers come forward for counsel.

He has been to Germany twice to help provide aid to soldiers rotating in and out of Iraq. But they hear repeated mixed messages. On the one hand, help is available, whereas on the other only a “whus” would admit that he is in emotional pain. “We (therapists) were under-used,” he laments, “. . . there’s going to be a tsunami of pain when they return.”<sup>15</sup>

And when our child-soldiers do admit that they need help, argues Vietnam vet and author Stan Goff, psychiatrists routinely diagnose PTSD symptoms as a “personality disorder”:

This is a *policy*, designed to inhibit the number of future claims of PTSD to be paid for by the V.A. *Personality disorder* has its ostensible origins in childhood, not military service, and cannot be claimed as service-connected. (From the Wilderness)<sup>16</sup>

Vets hear this response *if* they can find a mental health professional, since military insurance is cutting payments to therapists, on top of already low reimbursement rates and a tangle of red tape (Hefling 2007).<sup>17</sup>

Almost none of those who sold America the Iraq war had served in the active military.<sup>18</sup> The only exceptions were Donald Rumsfeld (1954–1957); Richard Armitage, who participated in the CIA’s “Phoenix Program;” and Colin Powell, who in 1969 had a role in the Army’s cover up of My Lai (Parry and Soloman 1996). In February 2003, Powell ordered that the U.N.’s copy of Picasso’s great antiwar painting *Guernica* be *veiled* before he would present Bush’s case for invading Iraq, lest anyone remember that most of the casualties of modern war are civilians. Stung by 9–11 and the affront to their sense of innocence, Americans were too willing to believe him.

The myth of American innocence is constructed partially upon identifying threats and demonizing others (Indians, blacks, immigrants, communists, and terrorists), partially through repeating stories of our innate goodness and purity and partially through forgetting.<sup>19</sup> After twenty years of *Rambo*-inspired inversion of history, yellow ribbons for the POWs, and media images of pathological vets, Vietnam has now been safely woven into our national narrative of altruism and idealistic intentions. An officer named Hugh Thompson—who landed his helicopter at My Lai to save Vietnamese civilians from Caley’s maddened troops—died in January 2006. Because he did not die in the war, he is forgotten: his name does not appear on the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial Wall.

The Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington, D.C. serves a number of purposes. First, by making no political statement about the war, it counters the flood of belligerent media noise by offering a silent place for people who have no common political or cultural language to share public sorrow. The memorial doesn’t mention the ranks of the dead, and it lists them not alphabetically but in chronological order, making them individuals rather than statistics. Thus, walking along the wall, the visitor is drawn into the story of the war itself, the one known only by the veterans, where patriotism gives way to uncontrollable death. We experience the escalation of the war—the panels rise from ground level to above our heads, and we feel helpless before the

staggering numbers, where individuals turn back into statistics. After the high point, we follow the wall back toward its low point, just as American soldiers were gradually withdrawn. But this is no linear narrative: The earliest fatalities are inscribed at the memorial's central hinge and loop around, so that the last dead are listed next to them. The hinge between the two walls is a pivotal—and thus sacred—space between the end of one war and the beginning of the next, a place of temporary peace.

Second, as a receptacle for thousands of photographs, poems, and memorabilia (and through the ritual of making rubbings of the names), the memorial invites us to conduct emotions from one world to the other, to enter an active, ritual conversation with the dead. By 1995, over 500,000 non-perishable items had been left at the wall (Allen 1995). In addition, since visitors must look up the names in a printed index to locate them on the wall, they take more of an active role.

A third purpose is revealed in its low, anti-heroic design. The black granite standing within the earth is an interface between the sunny world of the father-gods and the dark abode of their children. For veterans it marks the boundary between their memories and the present. Sinking gradually like blood soaking into soil, it subtly reminds us of our collective responsibility to the dead and of the knowledge that can be found in the dark earth. It “. . . coaxes everyone into the same ritual of descent,” writes journalist Michael Ventura, “a ritual that the psyche can't help but recognize” (1993, 169). The polished black marble surface reflects our faces behind the inscribed names, as if we were among the dead, looking back into our own eyes. The veil between the worlds is very thin here. (It is worth noting that *apocalypse* means “to lift the veil.”)

Its fourth purpose is to encourage an imagination of reconciliation. A veteran left this note, along with a photograph:

*Dear Sir:*

*For twenty-two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only eighteen years old that day that we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai . . . Why you didn't take my life I'll never know. You stared at me for so long, armed with your AK-47, and yet you did not fire. Forgive me for taking your life. I was reacting just the way I was trained, to kill VC . . . So many times over the years I have stared at your picture and your daughter, I suspect. Each time my heart and guts would burn with the pain of guilt. I have two daughters myself now . . . I perceive you as a brave soldier defending his homeland. Above all else, I can now respect the importance that life held for you. I suppose that is why I am able to be here today . . . It is time for me to continue the life process and release my pain and guilt. Forgive me, sir. (Allen 1995, 52)*

Novelist Toni Morrison's phrase *disremembered past* describes that which is neither remembered nor forgotten, but haunts the living as a ghost. The path to closure, for the soul and for the soul of the culture, goes directly through the recovery of memory and mourning rather than through forgetting. Only then can the “corpses” of a life—all one's

losses and disappointments—receive proper burial. In other, older cultures, authentic grief rituals align the ego's wish for closure with the deeper intentions of the soul to know itself. This is depicted in the *Iliad*, our oldest war story, when Priam begs Achilles for the body of his son Hector. The king must confront both the corpse and the cause of his son's death. Acceptance of the truth at this level leads to real closure, while grieving together, as Priam and Achilles do, unites people, even enemies, like nothing else.

In Vietnamese Buddhism, souls are said to linger near their families for four generations. But without proper burial rites, they can't continue on to the spirit world. With 300,000 missing from the war (compared to 1,500 Americans), many rural Vietnamese consider their country to be one of wandering souls (*co bon*). When relatives finally accept that a loved one's body will never be found, they build an empty "windy tomb" (*ma gio*) in the family plot. On their national holiday, the Day of Wandering Souls, they tend these tombs praying that all souls might remember the way home.

By contrast, in film after film, Hollywood has made our veterans of that war into scapegoats. By implying that they are *morally* wounded and by not addressing the economic—and mythic—forces that drive us to war, the media allows the rest of us both to forget national responsibility—the United States has attacked, directly or indirectly, *forty-three countries* since the end of World War II—as well as to ignore individual trauma (Chossudovsky 2007). Eventually the nation as a whole learned to separate the warriors from the war. At least we don't spit on them or call them baby killers. By 2004, no one could ignore the ubiquitous sight of gas-guzzling SUVs (often built in other countries) sporting magnetic ribbons exhorting everyone to "support the troops."

But if we can endure the sight of our own reflections in the black granite, the Wall invites us to remember that we all—simply by being Americans—suffer from unhealed trauma. PTSD occurs within a wider syndrome: our endemic numbing, our unwillingness to mourn, our denial of death, and our addiction to innocence, which leads us to repeat the tragedy of Vietnam endlessly.

Actual war vets have experienced a terrible initiation without completing it. So psychologists like Edward Tick have had success with a three-part healing process: purification, storytelling, and restitution (2005, 189–283). Without remembering and grieving, writes Shay, veterans continually reenact their traumas. But *communalization*, telling one's story within a trusted community—or at the Wall—can "rebuild the ruins of character." For such healing to occur, however, listeners must be willing "to experience some of the terror, grief and rage that the victim did. This is one meaning, after all, of . . . compassion" (Shay 1994/1995, 189).

The wound leads to the gift: The need to make meaningful narrative out of trauma leads to the search for authentic community and for art. *Mnemosyne* was mother of *the Muses*. The nine Muses serve her by rendering her essence—history—into art. The ancients knew that it was only Memory, giving birth to art, who could defeat Time.

Shay argues that veterans and the greater public for whom, in more ways than one, they have suffered should meet together, “face to face in daylight, and listen, and watch, and weep, just as citizen-soldiers of ancient Athens did” (1994/1995, 194).

## Memorials and Monuments

Consider a subtle distinction: We erect memorials so as not to forget; we build *monuments* so that we will always remember. Whereas memorials mark the reality of endings, monuments embody the myths of beginnings, and if America is about anything, it is about beginnings. The World War II Memorial was dedicated on the National Mall in 2004, not far from the Vietnam Memorial. Its official website ([www.wwiimemorial.com](http://www.wwiimemorial.com)) describes it as

A monument to the spirit, sacrifice, and commitment of the American people to the common cause of defense . . . and to the broader causes of peace and freedom from tyranny . . . an important symbol of American national unity, a timeless reminder of the moral strength and awesome power that can flow when a free people are at once united and bonded together in a common and just cause.



(Photograph: Rachel Cooper, by permission)

### *The World War II Memorial*

Unlike the Vietnam Memorial, however, this memorial has almost no evocative power. It is a mild celebration of a heroic project that Americans can be proud of, rather than a focal point for grief over something—Vietnam—that many are ashamed of, something John Kerry once described as “. . . a filthy, obscene memory” (Turner 1996, 6).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this pleasant, park-like environment is as boring as a waiting line at the post office, especially for the hundreds of schoolchildren whose teachers lead them there for the required history report. It was established twenty-two years after the Vietnam Memorial, and its designers knew perfectly well how emotionally compelling it would be. We must conclude that they chose intentionally to tone down such impact. In fact, the Vietnam Memorial has spawned the designs of at least 150 other memorials; however, as Elizabeth Hess writes, “A strong desire to diminish, rather than engage (its) radical elements . . . is evident in the majority of these new memorials” (1987, 275). The designers of the World War II memorial created a fine place to take an aged veteran, a *safe* place calculated not to bring up too many unpleasant memories and to sooth them should they appear. It casts few shadows.

The two contrasting structures evoke two aspects of the National Mall and our national soul. The Washington Monument is the grand center of the mall, standing halfway between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial. Along the Mall, several great museums (the root of *museum* is *muse*, *Mnemosyne's* daughter) stand between it and the Capitol, and between it and Lincoln's shrine, lie various war memorials and space for future ones. With the exception of the Holocaust Museum (and arguably the Museum of the Native Americans), the eastern half displays America's great achievements in art and science, whereas the western half grudgingly accepts the need for darker meditations.

From a *Native* American perspective, however, humans are required to honor all four directions and their corresponding natural elements. The Washington Monument rises into air, visible for miles, whereas the Vietnam Memorial descends into earth. The World War II Memorial, with its predictable fountains, receives a pleasant flow of water from the reflecting pool. Like the Washington Monument, its primary color is white. Perhaps the memorial is so uninspiring because it lacks any reference to the fourth element, fire. It lists all of America's victories, except for Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. Without the balance of fire, the soothing balm of water becomes a *white-wash* of memory.

The Washington Monument belongs to Time and the father gods. Tall as a fifty-story skyscraper, this massive phallus speaks of *potency*: masculine confidence, progress, growth, opportunity, and achievement. Upon completion in 1885, it was the tallest building in the world. Like the huge painting in the eye of the Capitol Rotunda (*The Apotheosis of George Washington*), it proclaims his—and symbolically America's—right to sit at the table of the gods. It reaches to the heavens that, in our myth, have blessed America with its unique destiny and responsibility to improve the world in every way. Its whiteness symbolizes purity, righteousness, all possibilities, God's light

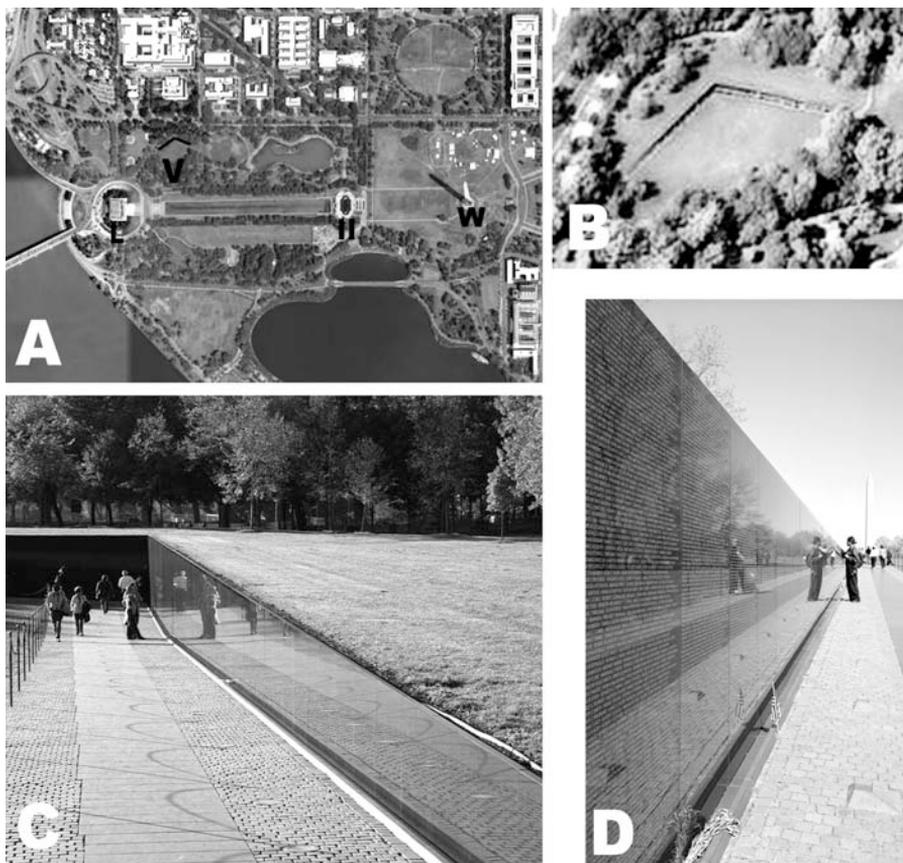
of redemption for the world—and, let's admit it, the dominance of white people in a city and a world that is overwhelmingly non-white. Along with the Capitol, it represents the American *empire* that our myths support and the technological capacity to serve empire's ends, even if those ends require—as do Chronos and Jehovah—the periodic sacrifice of its children.

By contrast, the Vietnam Memorial is for the sons and the grieving mothers. So much is obvious. If we take a deeper look, however, we see something else, something that could not have been consciously designed. Some greater power, unconcerned with chronological time—Mnemosyne herself, perhaps—has been at work. The Vietnam Memorial is aligned so that one of its walls points directly at the Washington Monument whereas the other points directly at Lincoln. Or we could say that they stare directly at it. After it was dedicated, two other related sculptures were added nearby: A group of three young soldiers gape at their own future, while three grieving nurses—one of them holding a dead soldier in a *Pieta* pose—can't seem to bear the sight and turn away. At first, Maya Lin, the Memorial's designer, vehemently opposed the addition of the sculpture of the soldiers, with its predictable American flag. Later, she realized, "In a funny sense, the inclusion (of the statue and flag) brings the memorial closer to the truth. What is also memorialized is that people still cannot resolve that war, nor can they separate the issues, the politics, from it" (Turner 1996. 179).

Tourists who leave the Mall by crossing Constitution Avenue from the Lincoln and Vietnam Memorials sometimes stumble upon the lesser-known Albert Einstein Memorial Grove, and here is where we may intuit the Vietnam Memorial's deeper significance. Einstein holds an open book inscribed with his equations that unlocked the secrets of the universe. But his *eyes* are the saddest I've ever seen sculpted in stone or bronze. They seem to be acknowledging the old truth that every increase in knowledge is an increase in suffering.

And this image, dedicated three years before the Vietnam Memorial, is staring directly at it, as if to imply that Einstein's discoveries led to nuclear fission, Hiroshima, the Cold War, and Vietnam. It is only a small leap in the mind to add America's post-Cold War world dominance, the consequent reaction of the Muslim world, 9-11, the unending War on Terror, and the betrayal of thousands more sons and daughters in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the Washington Monument boasts of our brightness and the Lincoln Memorial of our ethics ("With malice toward none . . ."), the Vietnam Memorial, this bloody gash in Mother Earth, offers us the opportunity to drop (unveil) the mask of our innocence and, like Persephone dragged down by Hades, find our souls in the center of America's darkness. The greatest lights cast the largest shadows. The Vietnam Memorial insists on reminding us of those shadows—and



*The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (A) Satellite view, showing the east end of the National Mall, with the Lincoln Memorial (L) to the west and the Washington Monument (W), which is casting a shadow, to the East. The World War II Memorial (II) lies between them, and the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial (V) lies between them to the north. As there is no structure visible from the air, the walls of the Vietnam Memorial are indicated by solid lines. (Dyane Sherwood, by permission, modified from googleearth.com) (B) Satellite image showing its two walls from above (U.S. Geological Survey) (C and D) Two views of the wall where the names of the dead are inscribed, The Vietnam Memorial (National Archives)*

that our healing can come only from facing our losses and crimes with unflinching eyes. But the Washington Monument, like all cathedrals to the father gods of the sky, pulls the eye away from the ground, away from any emotions but awe or pride, away, like Alzheimer's disease, from Memory herself. Like Ouranos, it pushes its children down into the Earth, where the three mother goddesses await half a mile away.

Late in 1994, Reagan announced that he had Alzheimer's. Seven months later, after a twenty-years of severed ties, Bill Clinton normalized relations with Vietnam.



(Photograph: Barry Spector, by permission).

*Statue of Albert Einstein, Einstein Memorial Grove  
(Robert Berks, sculptor)*

Leaving Washington, the tourist can take the Metro past Arlington National Cemetery and the Pentagon to—what/who else?—Ronald Reagan Airport. There, before boarding, we can browse the Smithsonian gift shop, which contains literally dozens of books about America's wars, its soldiers, its generals, its air power, its military hardware, and its strategies. We won't find *any* books about Vietnam, however, and no mention of the Vietnam Memorial. The tourists, their pride in America restored, are at peace.

I finish writing this essay on Studs Terkel's ninety-fifth birthday. The great chronicler of American memory is on the radio speaking about "the United States of Alzheimer's" ("Democracy Now" 2007). Alberto Gonzales utters the phrase "I don't recall," or the equivalent, sixty-four times in Senate testimony (Stout 2007). A month later, at the White House, President Bush publicly lectures Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet on human rights (Baker 2007). Chronos, for the time being, has defeated Mnemosyne.

#### ENDNOTES

1. "I know all the bad things that happened in that war. I was in uniform four years myself" (Reagan, defending his visit to a German SS cemetery, April 19, 1985). In the grandest of ironies, Reagan's official biographer Edmund Morris (*Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, Random House, 1999) dramatized Reagan's life with several invented characters, complete with fake footnotes.
2. The U.S.'s successful invasion of the tiny island of Grenada, allegedly to rescue American students, began exactly two days (October 25, 1983) after the terribly destructive terrorist bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon.
3. H. Bruce Franklin (1993) argues persuasively that each Presidential administration from Nixon to Clinton manipulated the myth of the POW for its own ends, until it became economically expedient to drop the issue and engage in very lucrative trade with Vietnam.

4. The recovery, 12-step, and self-help movements in general were enjoying their greatest popularity. *The Courage To Heal*, by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, on recovery from childhood sexual abuse, would eventually sell over a million copies.
5. Ironically, the exile of the elderly mirrored another exile: Hundreds of thousands of inner-city youth were being cast into prison, mostly for nonviolent drug offenses.
6. Later European images of Father Time included the scythe or sickle with which Chronos had castrated his father, as well as a crow (*corone* in Greek).
7. This study, commissioned by the Army War College in 1970, was so damning that General Westmoreland immediately had it classified.
8. Rachel MacNair, Ph.D., postulates the existence of a variant of PTSD she terms "Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Syndrome (PITS)." She argues that individuals who kill become traumatized as a consequence, not of being the victim of trauma as is the common interpretation of PTSD, but by being an active participant in causing trauma in others.
9. Friendly fire is also known in military terms as *fratricide*. Curiously, the English language includes *patri-*, *matri-*, *geno-*, *infanti-* and even *ecocide*, but it has no word for one of its primary mythic motifs, the sacrifice of the children. *Child* derives from German, rather than Latin. But perhaps the act is so taboo—that is, *sacred*—that our language refuses to name it.
10. Five days after Nixon's inauguration, his representative introduced the MIA/POW subject into the Paris peace negotiations and soon made it a major issue, "an ingenious tool for building insurmountable roadblocks within the peace talks" (Franklin 1993, 48).
11. Lembcke, however, notes that similar numbers of non-Vietnam veterans of the same era committed suicide. He and Faludi argue that the downturn in the economy and the wave of plant-closings that began in the 1980s (over 10 million jobs were lost in the "rust belt") had a powerful effect on the mental health of working-class men. But veterans of all wars continue to kill themselves in disproportionate numbers. The Veterans Health Administration estimates that of the approximately 31,000 suicides in the United States each year, 1,000 of these suicides occur among veterans receiving care within the VHA and as many as 5,000 suicides per year occur among all living veterans. These figures suggest that at least 16 percent of suicides in a given year are veterans (<http://veterans.senate.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.CurrentHearings&rID=996&hID=314>).
12. Although the Food and Drug Administration approved it, the Anthrax vaccine never went through large-scale clinical trials. Even after the war, troops who had never been deployed overseas, after receiving the anthrax vaccine, developed symptoms similar to those of Gulf War Syndrome. The Pentagon failed to report 20,000 cases to Congress, where soldiers were hospitalized after receiving the vaccine between 1998 and 2000. Anthrax vaccine is the only substance suspected in Gulf War Syndrome to which forced exposure has since been banned to protect troops from it.
13. Estimate provided by Veterans for America, formerly the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation.
14. The disability process symbolizes the bureaucratic confusion over PTSD. To qualify for compensation, veterans must prove that they witnessed at least one traumatic event. This standard is used to deny thousands of claims. But some experts argue that debilitating stress can result from accumulated trauma as well as from one significant event. Even the VA's chief of mental health, Ira R. Katz, wonders, "... what if someone hasn't been exposed to an IED but lives in dread of exposure to one for a month? ... According to the formal definition, they don't qualify" (Priest and Hull 2007).

15. Only 40 percent of troops who have screened positive for serious emotional problems seek help. Nearly 60 percent wouldn't seek help for mental-health problems because they felt their unit leaders would treat them differently; 55 percent thought they would be seen as weak, that soldiers in their units would have less confidence in them. (Priest and Hull 2007).
16. In 2002, almost half of Marine recruits were 17 or 18. Almost 600,000 of America's 1 million active and reserve soldiers enlisted as teens. As of March 31, the U.S. military included 81,000 teenagers. Its 7,350, 17-year-olds need parental consent to enlist, and only in April 2007 were all barred from battle zones (Allen 2007).
17. Roughly a third of returning soldiers seek out mental health counseling in their first year home. They are among the 9.1 million people covered by Tricare, the military health insurance program. This number has grown by more than 1 million since 2001. Tricare's psychological health benefit is "hindered by fragmented rules and policies, inadequate oversight and insufficient reimbursement," the Defense Department's mental health task force said in May (see [http://www.armytimes.com/news/2007/06/ap\\_soldiers\\_therapists\\_070610/](http://www.armytimes.com/news/2007/06/ap_soldiers_therapists_070610/).)
18. A partial list includes Bush, Cheney, Libby, Rice, Ashcroft, Rove, DeLay, Abrams, Arme, Quayle, Hastert, Frist, Santorum, Bolton, Abrams, Wolfowitz, Podhoritz, Fukuyama, Perle, Bauer, Kristol, Gingrich, Krauthammer, Friedman, Bennett, Negroponte, Woolsey, and Forbes.
19. The [O] notion of *syndrome* (literally, "running together") is fundamental to America's understanding of history. The "Vietnam Syndrome," an image of an emasculated, timid nation, was replaced by a syndrome of acquired immune deficiency. The body (politic) was transformed and destroyed by a shifty, evil invader—a terrorist (Sturken 1997, Ch. 7). Next came the Gulf War Syndrome, an unexplained array of symptoms that have broken down another generation of heroes and countered the attempt to regenerate the myth of heroic American decisiveness.
20. In April 1971, Kerry and dozens of other veterans camped on the Mall and hurled their medals onto the steps of the Capitol.

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#### ABSTRACT

This essay considers America's war memorials in Washington, D.C., in terms of the mythically charged conflict between the fathers of the World War II generation and the sons who fought in Vietnam. Young men need to be initiated, to have their innate purpose seen by their elders, and to contribute to a grand, transpersonal cause. But in America their dream collides with a culture that literalizes the old myths of the killing of the children. Images from Greek myth—*Ouranos* and *Chronos*—and the biblical *Jehovah* have long been our models for the father-son relationship.

America enacted those conflicts in the betrayal that its soldiers experienced in Vietnam and subsequent wars. World War II veterans were celebrated as heroes, whereas their sons have carried the burden of losers. Their suffering has been compounded by their common experience of betrayal—of having been sacrificed by their own fathers. Yet the fathers are currently experiencing an epidemic of Alzheimer's disease, which I interpret as a metaphor for national denial. We can see these themes—as well as the possibility of authentic cultural healing—expressed in the monuments dedicated to these two generations. The World War II Memorial and the Washington Monument praise the gods of the sky, while the Vietnam Memorial is a model for the public rituals of mourning that America needs—rituals that we can still find in other cultures.

#### KEY WORDS

abandonment, Abraham, Alzheimer's disease, betrayal, child sacrifice, Chronos, Isaac, Iraq, Jehovah, myth, memory, National Mall, Ouranos, veterans, Vietnam War, World War II