

The Haunting National Memory of Vietnam

A War Where the Losers Write the Story

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Introduction: The Three Part War

“All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory” (Nguyen 2016). Unlike all wars, the Vietnam War was fought in three parts: on the battlefield, on the homefront, and later in memory. In the tempestuous, unforgettable decade that was the sixties, American men were drafted to fight alongside South Vietnamese allies in a war against communism. The country became deeply divided between those in favor and those opposed to intervention in Southeast Asia. As domestic issues became more prevalent, such as the Civil Rights movement, many Americans were unhappy at the prospect of turning a blind eye to more immediate, internal issues plaguing the country.

With a murky beginning aimed at combating the spread of communism and an inconclusive ending ultimately admitting U.S. defeat to the world, the American people struggled to cope with their humility and negative war sentiments. Accredited as one of the most violent wars, in a far away exotic land, the deployed American soldiers strove to return home from “Nam,” unknowing that Nam would come home with them. The ghosts that followed these men home casted a shadow on American society, haunting the country by exacerbating feelings of weakness, defeat, and shame. Following Vietnam, political and public spheres stalled all forms of commemoration since the United States was not prepared to confront the defeat that loomed over them.

“The end of war brings with it the obligation to remember” (Ehrenhaus 1989: 97). In the years following the conflict in Vietnam, the United States made great efforts to take what was widely acknowledged as a scandalous, unnecessary war and reframe it as an unavoidable tragedy. Various U.S. presidents relied heavily on reshaping the war narrative through presidential rhetoric, selective remembering, and commemorative devices, yielding significant truths about American national identity and democratic processes around forging history. With

this came a push to transform Vietnam War veterans from national disappointments to national heroes. These efforts are most evident through the planning of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial, which attempted to commemorate those lost in the conflict in an apolitical manner. During the 1980s, the war took on new frameworks as portrayals of what happened in Vietnam became skewed, thus leading to shifts in collective consciousness.

A political and social conscience molded by manipulated memories can have long lasting effects on a nation's psyche. The Vietnam War continues to be one of the most polarizing and significant episodes involving the reconstruction of memory in American history. There is an ever-growing literature examining memory studies and war, more specifically how societies reconfigure historical events to portray themselves in a more favorable light. Scholars also analyze the ways in which nations remember their own role in conflict and the impact memory has when it comes to social, economic, and political spheres. In the case of Vietnam, one must understand America's struggle to take accountability in order to recognize the profound effects resulting from their defeat on national identity and collective memory.

The scholarship concerning collective memory of war emphasizes that narratives are rarely unfiltered, but tailored to serve certain agendas or needs of modern day society. Scholars theorize that shifts of the narrative through commemorative devices unveil the nation's internal conflict dealing with conceptions of itself and its past. The prominent theories around memory reconstruction post Vietnam War include rebuilding a weakened nation, advancing government agendas, and creating an illusion of national unity to cover deep societal divides. While traditional war commemorations echo those of the past through their height, size, and lightness of color, the Vietnam Veteran Memorial rejected traditional practices by adopting unprecedented features including its shape, color, and design. Debates surfaced around what that new form seeks to represent and how the history of Vietnam should be situated in American national history: was it to be remembered as a glory or a tragedy?

In the 1980s scholars began investigating the significance of how the war was being remembered and its significance (Nguyen 2016). Resurgence of Vietnam memories in the 1980s emerged to redeem the country's perceived national image of a world superhero. As talk about forms of commemoration began to emerge in the late 70s - early 80s, so did talk about the merit of the war in Vietnam and how a memorial should situate itself in American wartime remembrance. The way a nation chooses to commemorate victories and defeats is notable as it has a direct impact on how society conceives its past. An event disputed enough to provoke an unprecedented protest movement was reoriented in public memory as a tragedy; a memory where to many people America is the victim rather than an intrusive perpetrator of violence. The transformation from national humiliation to an honorable, unavoidable atrocity raises questions around how war stories are constructed, cultivated, and sometimes disseminated.

This thesis paper will provide context on the political climate in the wake of the Vietnam War and explore the previously mentioned literature involving shifts of the narrative through rhetoric and commemoration. The data section will give a behind the scenes look at the development of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial and how the controversy it induced suggests the presence of an ongoing internal conflict, particularly around controlling the war narrative. These sections will work together to substantiate the notion that the war narrative of Vietnam was heavily tailored as a means to serve the nation and people during a time of national strife. Collective memory of the Vietnam War provides insight into the ever-changing landscape of memories and history, and observing the details that national narratives choose to include or exclude emphasize the malleability of memory.

Context: Vietnam Legacies and Shadows

Understanding the roots of the conflict in Southeast Asia is crucial to understanding the transformations of American public sentiment, and public memory during and after the war. Vietnam was an epicenter of global conflict, having battled imperialist powers such as China, the French, and the United States. As a taxi driver pointed out to author Christian Appy, Vietnam is the only nation on earth that has defeated three of the five permanent members of the United Nations security council (Allen, Long 1991 p 18). The Vietnamese were able to defeat these world powers thanks to their shared patriotic national identity that motivated them to fight to any end. North and South Vietnamese adversaries fought for their ancestral lands and home, without a hope to end the war but a determination to win it. Ho Chi Minh, the symbol of Vietnamese liberation and arch nemesis of the U.S. at the time, noted that the Vietnamese people were prepared to fight for up to one hundred years to protect their lands. Ngo Vinh Long describes the Vietnamese as being “determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property, in order to safeguard their independence and freedom” (Allen, Long 1991). This gives the reader a deeper understanding as to why the Vietnamese people went to great lengths to protect their land and liberty during these wars. It also unveils cold truths as to why the civil war in Vietnam, this divide between North and South, ended with their own transformations and erasures of public memory.

Domestic divides over the United State’s involvement in Vietnam plays a key role in the transformation that turned a scandalous war into a tragic war. The American public was already confused by their involvement in Southeast Asia but remained supportive due to their fear of communism and desire for containment. With war costing billions of dollars a year, disillusionment amongst the American public was rapidly rising as the situation began escalating. The conflict was seen as a diversion of federal funds that could have been used to aid

domestic programs, specifically towards the Civil Rights movement. As televisions became ubiquitous to the American household, the war was brought to the living room of nearly every American family daily. Many Americans opposed the war on moral grounds and believed it lacked a clear objective. With young men being deployed against their will and the war turning into one of numbers, or death tolls, public support began to decline gradually. The notion that there was no clear purpose for American involvement in Vietnam caused grief postwar as the nation struggled to assign meaning to the deaths of young American soldiers.

It is useful to recognize how the political divides on the homefront contributed to the reconstruction of memories as opposing parties would exaggerate the true facts to support their political beliefs. More importantly, the meaning behind American involvement in the war was being debated, making it difficult to commemorate in the absence of a clear purpose. The Vietnam period was one entirely composed of divisions. Divides in American society included those who were pro-war and anti-war, amongst political parties, between emerging activist groups, and racial divides.

The entity of the anti-war movement, said to be the largest in US history, posed the US government with just as many internal conflicts as external. Towards the end of the war “there were over 1,000 antiwar groups” (Appy 263). Anti-war movement was a mix of many different movements and objectives, meaning there was no clear central organized cause and no single unified group. Their main unifying factor was the desire to withdraw American troops from Vietnam. Washington’s response to protests and the movement as a whole included “... hundreds of plans to attack, spy on, infiltrate, sabotage, harass, imprison, smear, divide, and discredit the antiwar movement” (Appy 263). This demonstrates the anxiety within the Capitol when they feel a loss of control, as a large portion of the country rejected the narrative they were being fed by government officials as to why citizens were being sent to fight in Vietnam. The significance in Washington’s response to the anti-war movement is in their efforts to control information, media,

and the public, all of which is repeated postwar when it comes time to remember.

All the while there were also increasing racial tensions, as the Civil Rights movement took serious strides in a fight for equality. Journalist Paul Potter stated during his speech at an anti war march that understanding the political system and how to advocate for change “can be the difference of not only death in Vietnam but death in the south” (“The Incredible War” 260). What is striking about this quote, and most likely resonated with many at the march, is the parallel drawn between the conflict in Vietnam and the conflict in the U.S.: civil rights. Many parallels are drawn between the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War Movement since the Vietnam War was at the core of their anger. Minority communities were disproportionately affected during this period since they were unable to avoid the draft. Creedence Clearwater makes mention in their hit song Fortunate Son, “I ain’t no senator's son,” meaning without parents in powerful places, without wealth or status, marginalized individuals were unable to escape their inevitable doom that was the war in Vietnam.

African American men were forced to risk their lives and fight for Vietnamese freedoms that they themselves did not have access to in the United States. This is a point that Martin Luther King Jr. heavily stressed during his famous speech “Beyond Vietnam,” where he makes clear that there were domestic issues that needed to be addressed and the war in Vietnam diverted money and attention from Americans (Martin Luther King Jr. 1967). Increased tensions of activist groups and African American opposition to the war, demonstrate the grave domestic issues that were falling to periphery of the government's vision during the war in Vietnam, which inevitably caused what some consider to be a war on the homefront. The war on the homefront is a crucial aspect of understanding shifts in memory as these groups came to write a different narrative than other American citizens. As deeply rooted political, economic, social, and racial tensions continued to worsen the United States government resorted to creating an illusion of nation unity post Vietnam War in an effort to expedite social cohesion.

As a result of the triumphant victory of the North Vietnamese Communists that took place in 1975, America's defeat in the conflict was perceived as an international humiliation for years to come. In the wake of war, the country did not widely celebrate American soldiers returning home from Vietnam or give them the title of hero, which was applied to many World War II veterans. World War II was very cut and dry in terms of who was "Good" and who was "Bad." American civilians felt a clear purpose for United States intervention. When it came to fighting in Vietnam, the American people felt an absence of purpose for American presence on Vietnam soil, which eventually led to Americans searching for meaning behind the deaths of the many American soldiers abroad. Questions arose concerning how such a humiliating, scandalous war should be remembered. The American people and political leaders wanted to find a way to fit this national failure into the American narrative. Stunned by defeat, the American public remained silent for a couple years before beginning to produce war related works, expressions, and forms of commemoration. The war was an enormous failure in terms of loss of lives, money, energy, and the loss of America's reputation as an unstoppable force. This suspended grieving period in the wake of war halted the potential for closure post Vietnam and rendered memories vulnerable to manipulation, causing a shift in the narrative.

American presidential discourse between 1975-1995 highlights the desire on behalf of the people and the president to rationalize American defeat. Debate and discourse surrounding Vietnam are paramount to the landscape of American memories, a malleable memoryscape influenced by shifts in American culture as well as in the intellectual climate. Presidential discourse post war demonstrates how the nation's leaders chose to approach the topic of Vietnam and the language they use to discuss it. This presidential rhetoric is especially notable when presidents would try to present the nation with their own military policies. Scholars such as Robert McMahon make notable contributions to studies of public rhetoric employed by American presidents and the role political leaders' rhetorical strategies have on shaping the

public memory of Vietnam. Official remarks, reasoning, and words of memorialization in regard to the war warrant close observation, thus leading to public scrutiny and contestation. Official explanations play a role in constructing a national narrative as they contribute to the process of public memory formation and they also contribute to ongoing societal debates concerning the meaning of war. Ongoing and ever evolving is the public memory of war, a memory which is considered to be the product of rhetorical contestation by many memory specialists.

The rhetoric utilized by presidents, after the Vietnam War put emphasis on their struggle to explain the war's ultimate meaning and consequences. The reaction of the general public to political discourse also speaks volumes to the divisive nature of the war even after years have passed. Each administration that took office post Vietnam employed their own distinct rhetorical strategies. Gerald Ford's approach to Vietnam was one of forgetting and silencing, thus contributing to America's paused reaction to their loss and defeat. Ford's Speech at Tulane University in New Orleans in 1975 was memorable thanks to his appeal for a permanent moratorium concerning debates of the Vietnam War, meaning debates around the Vietnam War would be prohibited permanently. He also declared during his speech, "Americans can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned" (Ford 1975). With this line in particular Ford confronts the harsh reality that is America stuck dwelling on their humiliating defeat and attempting to refight the war in memory.

Christian Appy describes President Ford's response to the war stating, "No soap in the world could remove all the blood, or all the memories, but Ford would at least try to throw a towel over the mess." This idea stems from former President Richard Nixon and all his attempts to "wash our hands of Vietnam" (Appy 2015: 225). The significance of this is the overall desire to wash the country clean of guilt and the hopes to cover this low historical point up in order to progress towards a brighter future. Violence and atrocities so severe that soap would be unable to

clean the deep stains on history that the war left, the last resort is to hide the stain or find a new way to present that stain to the public sphere. Having a political administration that is willing to change the frameworks of an event as a way to downplay its severity and make it appear more acceptable is a key component of how memory is molded, even manipulated. In contrast to Ford and his desire to close a painful chapter of United States history, his successor Jimmy Carter's rhetoric strategy is one of atonement.

Carter placed the blame of Vietnam at the feet of political leaders in an attempt to absolve the American people of their guilt, thus contributing to public amnesia. When speaking about Vietnam Veterans he stated that "... instead of appreciation and support, they have been criticized and rebuffed because they answered the call of duty... our Nation's response to their heroism hurt more than their wounds"(Jimmy Carter 1978 "Veterans Day Remarks"). The rhetoric of atonement was prevalent in Carter's initial campaign, speeches, and interviews. Carter was known for condemning his predecessors for allowing the United States to intervene in Vietnam. He would use the failure as a way to emphasize national lessons, and began to shift his focus towards honoring those who served. While giving his remarks *at the Arlington National Cemetery on Veterans Day 1978*, Carter clearly unveiled his rhetorical strategy of sympathizing for Vietnam veterans, a noteworthy strategy as it begins to shift the national self perception from intervening aggressor to victim in the conflict. His political objective in using this strategy was likely to reaffirm and strengthen American collective identity, which was severely shaken by the defeat. Since this is a defining history, one that Americans felt did not align with their morals and values, Carter's rhetorical attempts to alter the narrative helped reinforce the American identity and provide the country with a more desirable version of the story.

The transition towards a more sentimental approach to the war and its participants is a strategy Ronald Reagan utilized, but to far greater extremes. His maudlin display of emotion provoked a resurgence of American pride, a heroic portrayal of veterans, and a push to

memorialize the Vietnam War in the 80s. When speaking about Vietnam, Reagan extracted what he deemed to be critical points from the narrative. In so doing, Reagan had American's call into question conceptions about the war being immoral, wrong, and an utter humiliation. Rather he made it clear that the American heroes that went to Vietnam did so to serve and protect their country, fulfilling their civic duty. Reagan's rhetorical strategy to speak of Vietnam was to do so with pride and to praise the soldiers who fought. While this method may cause him to appear more radical, Reagan was essentially revising the narrative from defeat to triumph, as he encouraged the public to celebrate and honor the noble veterans. In August 1980, Ronald Reagan's campaign speech noted Vietnam to be "a noble cause" (Auster and Quart 2018, 80). The words of the president are powerful and can influence public perception which is precisely what this rhetoric did in the 80s. The role and significance of Vietnam veterans and POWs were being re-examined and placed at the forefront of public attention. Those in opposition and in support of the war alike were acknowledging the war participants with more respect and speaking more highly of veterans. Speaking of war in a sentimental way, and pushing for more triumphant perceptions, led to a shift in memory as the public began to bury the negative sentiments around defeat with praise for their veterans, successes in Vietnam, and patriotism.

A notable address was given on February 18, 1983 before the Conservative Political Action Conference that demonstrated Reagan's stance on veterans, the war, and who is responsible. In his dinner address he praises Vietnam veterans calling them "undefeated" soldiers who were "heroes as surely as any who ever fought in a noble cause" (Reagan 1983). In his dinner address there are evident tones of praise and honor, defending the soldiers who fought in Vietnam for the United States. Famously referring to the war as a noble cause, on numerous occasions, suggests that the presence of American troops in Vietnam is in the same playing field of memory as other American conflicts such as the American War of Independence and World War II. Reagan was able to reappropriate Vietnam to be perceived as a moral victory rather than

a national loss. This transformation created an impression that American troops were triumphant in every encounter in Vietnam when considering the individual sacrifices made by the U.S. forces. During the address he also remarked, "...those veterans of Vietnam who were never welcomed home with speeches and bands, but who were undefeated in battle" (Reagan 1983). Reagan's word choice and rhetoric in his speeches have severe impacts on the way the American people understand the nation's involvement and success in Vietnam. Reagan's push to welcome home Vietnam War veterans, despite it being years later, caused a change in public sentiment towards the war and its veterans. While forms of commemoration were being produced in the 1980s, the presidential rhetoric being used caused a shift in the mood of Americans which was evident as domestic support became more apparent for the veterans. Labeling the soldiers as heroes and going so far as to call them "undefeated" despite being the losers of the war highlights the American desire to rewrite the story of Vietnam and rationalize American defeat.

If the president is stating the soldiers are undefeated then the nation will likely agree and accept this as a true fact, especially since they also desire this version of the narrative to be true. Carter threw the blame of defeat on the shoulders of politicians, while Reagan's Vietnam narrative points fingers at those who failed to recognize American soldiers as heroes. These interpretations of heroes and villains through the use of different rhetorical strategies cause a rift in the landscape of memory. Reagan consistently ennobled Vietnam veterans and shifted perspective on American intervention in Vietnam making it widely accepted as being a means to defend freedom and a necessary way to maintain peace, contain communism, and protect allies from tyranny. Ronald Reagan fostered a collection of myths around the war in Vietnam that altered its significance, causing the narrative to be repositioned in the realm of memory as American citizens began to prioritize the new, more likeable stories being told. Rhetorical approaches used by U.S. presidents following the Vietnam War demonstrate visible efforts to

justify American intervention, to strengthen American collective identity, and to mold the narrative in a way favorable to the United States.

Literature Review: Commemorating Loss and Defeat

There is an ever growing literature examining memory studies and war, more specifically how societies reconfigure historical events to portray themselves in a certain light. Scholars also attempt to analyze the ways in which nations remember trauma, and the role memory has when it comes to social, economic, and political spheres. This literature review will seek to analyze scholars' efforts to understand America's struggle to take accountability in the wake of the Vietnam War and the profound effects that denial had on commemorative practices, thus influencing the construction of collective memory. Given that I will be reviewing several texts, I will first analyze these pieces of literature by grouping together scholars with common overarching theories. These theories provide potential motives and methods behind the modification of collective memory, all of which put an emphasis on the societal consequences of muting certain histories. The overarching theories will be split into sections that concentrate on the role of the government, the entertainment industry, and commemorative practices in memory shifts. The final section will attempt to put these scholars into conversation with each other as a way to support the notion that in the face of defeat, the United States coped with negative sentiments and national strife by tailoring their national narrative of what occurred in Vietnam as a way to strengthen their national identity and create the illusion of a unified America, which ultimately prevented closure and left social issues boiling below the surface.

Scholars such as Nguyen, Ehrenhaus, and McMahon have demonstrated a nation's obligation to remember in the wake of war and the dangers that accompany the fabrication of national memories at the hands of the government. One common theory amongst these scholars is that the United States' primary focus was to rebuild the nation's identity through political and

social realms by circulating conflicting directives between forgetting and remembering. Additionally, scholars such as Papayanis, Appy, Kammen, McMahon, and Nguyen explore how nation-states have a propensity for modifying their past in hopes of accommodating to the mental and emotional needs of modern day society. The scholars previously mentioned hone in on the manipulation of memories through the entertainment industry and the government as a means to alter American historical consciousness. Lastly, scholars like Edkins, Ehrenhaus, Hagopian, and Butler examine the politics of healing, and how a nation that prides itself on being an unstoppable force copes with national trauma and defeat. Through an analysis of national commemorations and the process of their construction, these scholars ask probing questions like who should we remember and how do we remember. A weakened national image and a hurt ego fostered a level of desperation in post Vietnam War America that led to memory shifts concerning heroism and sacrifice, national victimhood, and social cohesion.

A vast array of scholars ranging from diverse fields find themselves inclined to examine the role collective memory plays within societies. The challenges and tribulations that memory poses to the public have provoked the emergence of rich theoretical frameworks, with a majority of it concentrating on how war in particular is remembered. Scholars continue to stress the ways in which communities commemorate and interpret their difficult pasts is often more important than the past itself. This was a war that took a physical, mental, and emotional toll on soldiers and civilians alike. "Who controls the past, controls the future" (Orwell 1949: 44). A line from George Orwell's famous novel 1984, draws attention to the importance of remembrance and its link to public discourse, national identity, and the future. The novel involves a dystopian society with a government that manipulates its citizens and forges history. Despite the many layers and potential interpretations of this line, the quote recognizably stands out to anyone interested in memory studies, as they know the relevance of underlying bias and personal agendas. Those who write and manage history have immense power over both the individual and the group. Orwell's

novel makes clear the extent to which collective memory impacts a society and influences their future actions. Orwell's 1984 is suspected to be based off the German Nazi party, yet remains relevant to the rewriting of history and the frameworks of historical memories. The protagonist, Winston Smith, works in the Ministry of Truth where he is tasked with the duty of creating and forging the past in ways unrecognizable to those with accurate memories. The forgeries become historic facts and are then to be undisputed and accepted. When studying the conflict in Vietnam within the scope of memory studies, the dangers behind government involvement in the writing of history becomes apparent, just like they do in this novel. The book highlights the vulnerability of memories and the consequences of erasure, all of which are applicable to the real world. The science fiction novel grapples with ideas of mutable histories, perversions of truth, and government involvement in how a nation remembers

Commemorating an Embarrassing Defeat

Remembering entails reaffirming the legitimacy of purpose, in the case of Vietnam it was a purpose continuously called into question. Remembrance also reaffirms the individual's relationship to their political community, reminding them of their responsibility to each other and their nation. Public commemoration, notably through memorials, is a socially sanctioned narrative that shapes citizens' understanding of the past while giving value to future events. Attempts to commemorate Vietnam were met with obstacles due to the U.S. obsession around reputation and success. "The greatest shame in America is to be guilty of failure" (Ehrenhaus 1989: 99). In many ways America's failure in Vietnam was personified by the veterans who were called to serve. Ehrenhaus' article then shifts focus to the Tomb of unknown soldiers, which further explores a future unblemished by human violence and serves as evidence of America's desire for closure.

Peter Ehrenhaus argues that commemoration seems almost inappropriate when it comes

to Vietnam. Political institutions and the public alike postponed any potential of postwar closure immediately following the war, despite their obligation to commemorate the conflict and its veterans. This explains the delayed reaction in the wake of the war, as the nation was not yet prepared to confront the deep divides and defeat looming over the nation. “The end of war brings with it the obligation to remember” (Ehrenhaus 1989: 97). Ehrenhaus’ piece on commemorating the unwon war examines how the United States turned away from closure, choosing not to remember when tradition warrants closure in the wake of war. Ehrenhaus analyzes the suppression of closure and commemoration through Gerald Ford’s shift in policy statements as the South of Vietnam collapsed. The strategic use of political silence in the wake of the Vietnam War followed by Ford’s policy statements and the establishment of the Tomb for Unknown soldiers amplified conversations from the American community that reveal contradictory directives between the act of forgetting and the need to remember.

His work aligns nicely with that of Jenny Edkins through her text, “Trauma and the Memory of Politics,” which examines how people remember traumatic events like war, while also raising concerns around the role of commemorations in society. She implies that many of these forms of commemoration have been deeply influenced by state power and serve to reinforce power and nationhood. These ideas link to Nguyen who also stressed the ways commemorative Vietnam statues celebrate only their nation and do very little to prevent future conflict. She interestingly examines the implications of such commemorations in terms of rhetoric, politics, and identity. Edkins suggests throughout her work that not all memory practices are an attempt to ignore past horrors, but rather an attempt to utilize memory as a way to promote change. Therefore, her central argument is that memory practices should be used to challenge the political systems that allowed the violence to take place; these practices will have the potential to prevent history from repeating itself. Her theory that the state tailors commemorations to uphold their national self perception of a powerful country supports the idea

that memories are modified through the process of grappling with defeat, as the nation refused to commemorate the more shameful components of the war in the public sphere.

A scholar that complements the work of Edkins is Patrick Hagopian. *The Vietnam War in American Memory* by Patrick Hagopian is considered to be one of the more sophisticated works in the field of memory studies. The text pays close attention to the influential role of Vietnam memorials and monuments on national remembrance. He seeks to examine specific methods of memorialization, namely America's Vietnam veterans. As monuments and memorials erected in the 1980s, inscrutable discourse of healing and reconciliation began to camouflage more unsettling remembrances of America's longest, at the time, and most controversial war. This is best supported by Edkins notion that intense remembering often results in intentional forgetting (Edkins 2003). Though a complex idea, Edkins and Hagopian are implying that remembering in an intense manner all at once leaves little room for the public to gather what Viet Thanh Nguyen termed as a "just memory" (Nguyen 2016). Meanwhile unjust memory, which is what he defines as a memory that "limit[s] empathy and compassion to those just like us" and "terminate[s] empathy and compassion for others" (Nguyen 2016 p 267). Undesirable, shameful, and toxic memories are more difficult to restrict in traditional memorial forms and also quite difficult to remember which are some of the many reasons these memories are left behind. Hagopian reminds his reader that the parts of history that a nation forgets can often be just as important as the parts remembered (Hagopian 2009).

Another noteworthy piece of literature that speaks to the work of Hagopian, Edkins, and Ehrenhaus is the work of Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz who argue in their work "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past," that with commemoration poses challenges around the way society conceives its past, mainly due to the nation's history being a core contributor to it's identity: an identity that prefers celebrating former glories as opposed to losses. The article examines commemoration through an analysis of the Vietnam

Veterans Memorial but more importantly places a focus on the way society incorporates these shameful and humiliating events into their public sphere. Commemorations of less than glorious events, like the war in Vietnam, tend to induce controversy instead of the desired consensus. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a prime example of such strife as the design was widely contested, along with several other Vietnam War monuments that were erected throughout the United States. Being such a controversial war in terms of politics and morals, memorials commemorating this dark history are seen not as symbols of solidarity; however, structures rendering conflicting self conceptions of the nation and its past visible to the world. Hagopian affirms that most forms of commemoration, like monuments, tend to eschew particular elements of war such as its overall purpose. Hagopian states, “the memorials implicitly valorize military service as worthy of honor, irrespective of the behavior of individual troops, the conduct of particular operations, or the purpose of the fighting” (Hagopian 2009: 16-17). This is yet another reason posed by scholars to explain why the public narrative of the Vietnam War changed: the desire to achieve national unity seemed of far greater importance than reconciliation. Hagopian utilizes the theories of French sociologist Émile Durkheim's, being that moral unity is at the core of commemoration. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the Vietnam memorials that were constructed thereafter, are perceived as devices clearly conveying America's internal conflict dealing with conceptions of itself and its history.

As the United States has not faced a plethora of military defeats, especially to the size and scale of Vietnam that touched the whole country, it is useful to analyze defeat in post civil war America to see the parallels between the South's difficulty to come to terms with their loss and the way they chose to remember their place in the war. David Blight's *Race and Reunion* offers invaluable insight towards coping with defeat postwar, reconciliation or lack thereof, and the attempt to revise history by observing post Civil War America. The response by Gaines Foster, “Coming to Terms with Defeat: Post-Vietnam America and the Post-Civil War South”

emphasizes the idea that there was not only one war fought from Vietnam but several: in Southeast Asia, on the homefront, the third one being the aftermath of the war and attempts to understand what those wars in and over Vietnam meant. The public's horror around the war and frustration about defeat caused them to neglect talking about it and heavily influenced public psyche and politics. As a way to analyze the nation's coping methods around their defeat, Foster draws upon the Civil War and the way in which the defeated South interpreted their loss with acceptance of veterans and reconciliation with the North; however, they did not learn any real lessons or gain any wisdom. The South rejected notions that their defeat constituted judgments upon their cause and instead believed that they fought over constitutional principles, and because of that they think they acted on morally and legally just grounds. This interpretation helped these veterans cope with defeat believing they acted heroically, whereas for Vietnam there was an ongoing search for a purpose that Americans fought for. This was in some ways mimicked by the media portrayal of Vietnam Soldiers in the eighties and also by the shifts in perceptions of veterans and national unity.

Theories behind Social Divides and Narratives that Dominate the Memoryscape

Bernard Fall, otherwise known as the expert of the Vietnam War, was a prominent war correspondent who vehemently opposed communism yet heavily criticized the U.S. His mentions of motivations behind the key actors involved in the conflict help develop an understanding around the polarized political realm and how such emotionally and politically charged sentiments and events could become skewed in a nation's narrative. His writings are considered to be an important part of the historiography of the Vietnam war, mainly because he helps the reader understand how and why this war happened. Fall was capable of viewing Vietnam in its full historical context along with his own first hand experiences. His overarching

critique was that American policy reflected ignorance and misunderstanding of Vietnam. However, it is important to note that American soldiers were drafted, many of whom did not even know where Vietnam was situated prior to the war. The Vietnamese were fighting to protect their land and freedom long before the United States stepped in, and that is often overlooked. Fall critiques soldiers that would land and act as though Vietnam history begins with U.S. involvement, which makes sense considering most of these soldiers lacked the historical context of Vietnam (Hess & McNay 63). Polarized social and political realms lead to alterations of war stories as American citizens are overwhelmed with opinions and emotion, thus distorting true happenings.

The memories at the forefront of public discourse are often those legitimized by the state. Edkins observes, these narratives "seem unable to get away from rhetorics of state or nation (Edkins 2003: 171). Appadurai's main theory of narcissism of minor differences applies to the deep divides on the homefront, but it also directly supports the idea that selective memory mutes other histories through distinctions between American and South Vietnamese veterans, which will become more clear in the data analysis section. Selecting certain histories to push to the foreground of public memory in order to live up to the nation's self-image led to Vietnam War narratives being muted in American history, particularly those of the South Vietnamese, thus molding American consciousness as the selected memories dominate American consciousness.

Judith Butler's theories in her *Frames of War* is a piece that memory studies scholars frequently interact with. Butler poses questions around precarious lives, how those are determined, and whether or not they are grievable after death. Analyzing lives considered to be precarious advances the understanding of how war memories are constructed, reconstructed, and sometimes erased. Through her study of 9/11, Butler raises questions around why Americans grieved the victims of 9/11 and American soldiers that fought due to its happening, but little attention was given to all the deaths that happened abroad, to the "other," as a direct result of

American military. The example of 9/11 allows Butler to explain the role of the state who lays down the groundwork for what is and is not grievable. Her theories of grievability contribute to the discourse of memory studies as the United States government had a hand in determining who would be remembered from the Vietnam War and how. Since states have great influence on the portrayal of conflict to their own public, the way they choose to frame war causes people to feel a sense of moral abhorrence when considering their fellow citizens' lives lost. As accredited authorities validate the process of legitimizing grievances, the nation's citizens are left to decide who deserves to be grieved for publicly. Notions that one's nation, culture, and people are superior makes it easier to overlook the grievances of another. Given Judith Butler's interpretive frameworks and responses to state legitimation of grievances, it aids in the understanding as to how non-grievable precarious lives are simply obstacles for society to overcome through forgetting, for society presumed these lives were dead before their death, thus making it easier for them to remain dead in memory. Butler's theory of grievability is important in understanding the rationale and national capacity to forget narratives deemed less than memorable by the state and public.

A very influential scholar in the field of memory studies that has a concentration on Vietnam is Viet Thanh Nguyen. In one of his most popular contributions, *Nothing Ever Dies*, he examines the meaning of the war in Vietnam by approaching memory through an analysis of its power structures, along with a desire to assign accountability to both sides rather than just one. While the United States is often held accountable for violence, death, and the displacement of Vietnamese, it is insufficient to simply leave America with all the blame. Nguyen also gives attention "to communists in Vietnam and Laos [who] have never apologized for reeducation camps and the persecution of people who turned into refugees" (Nguyen 288). Exploring the way narratives are created and how they circulate, Nguyen utilizes a range of theories, texts, philosophers, and physical means of commemoration as a way to acknowledge the memory and

identity of the war. Blame placing is an important aspect to memory construction since remembering one party as inherently bad or evil can prevent reconciliation and leave haunting shadows on a nation. In his work, Nguyen focuses on how to produce accurate narratives of the war, ones that fulfill moral imperatives and remember all sides.

Nguyen stresses that to understand the narrations of a war, what Judith Butler defines as, "the most narrated war in history," is to validate its outcomes so that the nation can reconcile it with contemporary life. The first section of his work, *ethics*, revolves around ideas of remembrance and how people tend to remember their own, the "us," while excluding the "other," as Appadurai and Butler also made evident through their theories. Conflicting names of the conflict serve as a clear indication of an identity crisis: *The American War* versus *The Vietnam War*. Calling it the American War puts an emphasis on foreign aggression and places Vietnam as a victim, while leaving fault with the United States. Additionally, this name strikes the country of Vietnam with amnesia about crimes committed against one another, being the civil war, along with crimes in Laos and Cambodia. Whereas calling it the Vietnam War inversely places blame on Vietnam as the cause, while also omitting any notion of the United States being a foreign aggression. Under this name the United States makes clear that this is "their" war. Nguyen interestingly discusses the "life cycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten" (Nguyen 2016: 12). Placing inhumanity at the core of what Nguyen calls "just memory," he examines the distinctions of humanity and inhumanity within the scope of ethical memories (Nguyen 2016: 96). His notions of a culture's tendency to commemorate its own humanity often leads the nation's own inhumanity to be ignored, reinforcing Butler's ideas that the state and its people often pick and choose what they want to be remembered, which has irreversible consequences on collective memory.

Nguyen offers a provocative analysis of how war memories can enable future wars. If the war is not properly remembered then the country can make the same mistakes, they will fail to

learn from past mistakes, and it has the potential to create social tensions as people within the forgotten narratives are outraged by the misrepresentation of history. Author Kyle Longley of *Grunts* points out that misremembering and national myths can be perceived as the soil in which seeds of violence take root and eventually surface (Longley 2008). These myths shape political culture, which is evident through myths postwar Vietnam. Myths and constructed narratives are symbolic as they help manufacture group values while further influencing individuals' perceptions about their purpose. For these reasons, the scholar's discourse around myths contributes to the larger conversation around American coping methods when faced with defeat. Nguyen suggests celebrating all sides and parties involved, acknowledging all the atrocities and inhumanity committed by everyone, without portraying one specific group as the villain and the other group as the hero. A demand for a more empathetic and inclusive memory of Vietnam in politics could be useful to reshaping memory in a way beneficial to all. Another important point Nguyen makes is that the war machine is fueled by memory, a war machine that he insinuates should be disabled. Nguyen illustrates how the different ways that society remembers does different cultural work. This remembrance, even on a transnational scale, has the potential to serve political imperatives which for the most part refuses to take accountability for the violence while further empowering the war machine. In this way, memory is used in the realm of politics to execute certain plans and meet certain agendas, like how Vietnam is remembered for American paramount suffering.

One notable method of shifting the war narrative was through political discourse and the media. While the nation pushed to rebuild the image of an invincible country, the war took on new frameworks. Portrayals of what happened began to shift in the public eye, leading to shifts in collective consciousness. In the 1980s scholars began to investigate more thoroughly the significance of how the war was being remembered and why that matters (Nguyen 2016). More specifically, people began to recognize the importance behind collective memory, as it heavily

impacts foreign policy and national interests. It is worthy to note that alongside the teaching from professional historians exists a myriad of creators producing war related works including literature, art, museums, oral stories, politics, mass media, and pop culture. Michael Kammen offers an analysis on how these works contribute to an exclusive American historical consciousness surrounding Vietnam, one that has undergone great shifts over time in response to the context of American culture. In his title alone, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, the motive behind the text is to probe the links that bind commonalities hiding beneath the surface of particular conflicts. He is primarily focused on how American tradition sets up the basic foundation on which national identity and unity is developed. By recognizing the ways certain narratives come to dominate shared histories, and noting the role that influential figures play in interpreting social tensions, Kammen makes clear that oftentimes America creates an illusion of consensus and social cohesion. This mask of unity was intended to cover deep societal divides postwar and was put on America by nearly every following U.S. president as a way to save face and progress towards the future.

“Vietnam won’t go away. It’s ghosts still haunt the American psyche like fragments of a twisted nightmare” (Lefever 1997). In Ernest Lefever’s “Vietnam’s Ghosts,” he digs into ideas surrounding national identity, politics of humiliation, and forged collective values through myths. He focuses on American politics postwar, while analyzing the long lasting effects of Vietnam Syndrome, coined by Henry Kissinger. The term that emerged postwar developed an indispensable spot in American political lexicon, used frequently to detail America’s sensitive state and unwillingness to insert themselves into foreign affairs in the wake of the Vietnam War. What first served as a term to describe soldier trauma, evolved into a term that signifies national humiliation and failure. Arguing that the Vietnam syndrome was a direct result of the American “culture of shame, guilt and self-flagellation,” it inevitably “paralyzed America from using military force abroad.” This emphasizes how the war rendered the U.S. weak and disabled for

quite some time post war (Lefever 1997: A1). Another scholar, Arnold Isaacs, investigates how the "Vietnam Syndrome" created overly wary policy makers and affects most major U.S. foreign policy choices. He examines Americans' opposition toward getting involved with low-intensity conflicts that have the potential to escalate. Isaacs argues that since Saigon fell, the U.S. has engaged only in conflicts that they knew they would win, where their enemy had no chance (Isaacs 1997). This demonstrates the long lasting effects of the defeat on Vietnam on U.S. foreign policy and confidence.

In his work, Michael Kammen successfully communicates his belief that nations have a propensity for altering their past as a means to cope and move forward. He states that nations tend to "reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them," which they do as a way to meet the "needs of contemporary culture...manipulating the past in order to mold the present" (Kammen 1991: 3,13). This is particularly clear when tracing presidential and political discourse surrounding memories of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. What he details as a usable past, he takes great interest in the myths and symbols of post Vietnam War America with a particular interest in the way society renders undesirable memories invisible while manipulating aspects of others.

Robert McMahon similarly argues the national tendency to stretch truths and select certain histories, specifically through a close observation of political discourse and presidential rhetoric. He analyzes America's internal conflict about the purpose and significance of the Vietnam War. Having a primary concern in memory studies, on both an international and individual level, he refers to the memory of Vietnam as a "defining feature of our age." (McMahon p 161). This historical event provoked deeply rooted internal disputes that remain at the core of American collective memory, as they raise key questions about national identity and purpose, a purpose that U.S. presidents attempted to provide citizens with postwar to help them move forward.

Another leading expert in the field of Vietnam War studies is Christian Appy. He explains

in *American Reckoning* how presidents attempted to grapple with post Vietnam War America, a country that developed a strong mistrust in their political system. Along with these notions of covering up wounds, Appy describes President Ford's response to the war stating, "No soap in the world could remove all the blood, or all the memories, but Ford would at least try to throw a towel over the mess." This stems from former President Richard Nixon and all his attempts to "wash our hands of Vietnam" (Appy 2015: 225). The violence and atrocities were so severe that soap would be unable to clean the deep stains on history that the war left, the last resort is to hide the stain or find a new way to present that stain to the public sphere: manipulating the context. The significance of this is the overall desire to wash the country clean of guilt and the hopes to cover this low historical point up and progress to a brighter future.

Historians, political leaders, and scholars dealing with memory studies have a tendency to relate long lasting pains of war as wounds and scars. President Reagan also made mention of America's wounds and scars post Vietnam. Keith Beattie, author of *The Scar That Binds*, explores the implications of healing such wounds, and the troublesome effects that arise through the metaphor of wounds in need of healing. Embedded in the metaphor of scars and healing is an impression of fragility and weakness, all of which can be attributed back to the presence of cultural divisions. If the nation is badly wounded, how can they keep fighting? Beattie argues this metaphor emphasizes a loss of national power and helps explain how the United States would rather ignore and cover up their wounds rather than allowing it to breathe and heal. The function of bandaging the wounds is to forget the war along with the plethora of noxious issues associated with it, such as defeat and guilt. In this case of Vietnam, America slaps a bandaid on the wound until it is ripped off in the eighties.

Keith Beattie's article, "The Scar That Binds," compares George Bush's presidential inaugural address with President Bill Clinton's speech at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in 1993 as a way to demonstrate political rhetoric and discourse on what was once considered to be

a vehemently controversial subject. Comparing presidents from differing political parties helped demonstrate a national desire for unity during a time of great division. President George Bush declared that the principal takeaway from the war in Vietnam is that “no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.” President Bill Clinton proclaimed, “Let [the war in Vietnam] not divide us as a people any longer” (Beattie 1998). Beattie uses these two quotes to highlight the use of the word “Vietnam,” which is conveniently situated at the forefront of the statements. The word denotes a disruptive presence of Vietnam in American society, simultaneously it is being used to form unity. While accepting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on behalf of the American people, President Reagan referenced the scars from Vietnam, stating it was time to “move on, in unity” (Beattie 1998: 1). Reagan presented social unification as critical in order for Americans to successfully move forward. Beattie dives deeper into such concepts through his analysis of representations and legacies of the conflict and how it is situated in the context of American culture. The central focus of this particular text is on the effects and impacts of the war. Studying the presence, or lack thereof, of identity and how that identity reworks itself within the history, often reconstructing a narrative.

Hollywood and the Media: Portrayal of the Vietnam Soldier and the Cliché of Atrocity

Vietnam ghosts lie dormant in the seventies but awaken in the eighties. Remains of war resurface from the corner of the earth like a zombie, not the same and often unrecognizable. Rick Berg analyzes America’s guilty conscience and efforts to suspend memory post war. Despite the establishment of the Tomb for the Unknown and the parades for soldiers, despite the transformation of Vietnam as an exploited resource for the American culture industry, Vietnam still remains. These problematic war remains are unrestrainable, and they put on display the many mutations of the war narrative. This also highlights America’s modes of cultural representation as impressionable, or what Berg calls a failure (Berg 2020: 95). He describes how

the mutations these war fragments that develop symbolize the desperate continuation of efforts to misrepresent what America lost in the war as merely missing, whether that be pride, American prisoners of war, money, time, artifacts, or the previous national identity of a world super hero. Finding no satisfactory transformation of remembrance, the illusion and war in memory is continuously fashioned by institutional influences. Berg traces how the American desire to forget and win the unwon war through revised tactics, politics, and altered representations from the cultural industry ultimately lead the United States to more defeat. While films like *Rambo* have an emphasis on winning, there is a clear implication that “America lost and forgot” (Berg 1986). This notion goes back to Edkins work, which discusses what is lost versus what is forgotten: buried under each imagined win are those who fought and suffered.

Nguyen further explores the American desire to repossess the war they lost when speaking on *NPR* about his Hollywood consultant friend who helps fashion more authentic details, concerning settings and costumes. Nguyen explains that Hollywood is less interested in the authenticity of characters and relates Vietnamese actors in Vietnam War American epics to stage props. They are simply there for design but have no voice. He goes so far as to say that “Hollywood is the unofficial ministry of propaganda for the Pentagon... its role is to basically prepare Americans to go fight wars by making them focus only on the American understanding of things and to understand others as alien and different and marginal, even to their own histories...” (NPR 2016). Describing the American population as marginal to their own histories ties in notions around state power that Jenny Edkins explains through her analysis of the inextricable links between the United States government and the realm of national memory.

This reels back in Appadurai’s theories of “us” versus “them” and helps construct the enemy that is considered “precarious” in the words of Butler and then soon forgotten in the memoryscape. Another part of this dialogue that stood out regarding the relationship between war and Hollywood, is that this is a war where the losers get to write the story. Nguyen stated, “I

often get people saying, if you look at Vietnam War movies, Americans come off really badly” (NPR 2016). To which he responds yes, but they are still the movie stars right? This brings up questions around American heroism and in this case the antihero. If given the option between being a virtuous extra, like a prop, or being a demonic antihero who is front and center, many would choose being the demonic antihero getting all the attention and being remembered.

Americans become the stars of these dramas as Vietnamese are pushed backstage, despite the Vietnamese paying the heaviest price of this war. These altered representations of the war, attempts to make America look victorious, and command of cinematic memory aids the U.S. in manipulating the public memory of Vietnam. This was a war waged by the U.S. with less than 60,000 dead Americans but 3 million Vietnamese people dead on all sides and 3 million Laotians and Cambodians dead during and in the years following (Spector 2020). With such industrial power capable of creating a vast inequity of death, it is not surprising the United States utilized it’s powerful cultural industry to win the war in memory. Wherever you go outside of Vietnam, sometimes even in Vietnam itself, there are American memories of the War.

In *Vietnam Shadows*, former war correspondent Arnold Isaacs focuses on the effects of the conflict in Vietnam on America postwar. Interpreting the cultural battle, or cultural stalemate, of the sixties that raged on well after the end of the war. Isaacs confronts common misconceptions about Vietnam including the idea that the U.S. military did not have clear goals and also tackled the popular myth that Vietnam may still be holding prisoners of war. Isaacs reveals how false missing in action stories could expose a deeper truth, stating, "We lost something in Vietnam and we want it back" (Isaacs 1997). This supports Berg’s notions of the transformation between what is lost and what is missing post war. Unanswered questions, an absence of clear purpose in intervening, and a nation desperate to forget their defeat and win a lost war through custom narratives motivated political leaders and cultural representations of the war to shift in ways more favorable to the public, thus leading to transformations of public

perception and memory.

The article “Everybody’s Coming Back a Hero: Reflections and Deflections of Heroism in the Gulf” by Alena Papayanis closely examines the construction, deconstruction, and tailoring of the label “hero,” mainly concerning veterans of the Gulf War (Papayanis 2010). Soldiers being perceived by the stereotype of violent killers shifted to an image of feminized victims, which then shifted to a masculine and moral warrior thanks to the push of President Bush and media members. This article offers a close examination of the relationship between these Vietnam stereotypes around veterans and the timeline they follow. Shifting representations that flow from one extreme of femininity to another of masculinity emphasize the flexibility of a national narrative through media and the manipulation of media by political figures.

The innocent victim stereotype is a phenomenon that has occurred more than once throughout American history, and poses dangers to collective memory as new generations rely on manipulated accounts of what once happened. Altering the past to paint the U.S. as a victim to foreign outrageous assaults can cause citizens to misinterpret the complex nature of the crimes American soldiers commit overseas. In *American Reckoning* Christian Appy analyzes the capture and hold of hostages in Iran and how America identified and endured the ordeal with those hostages. Upon their release Appy stated, “It was as if the whole country had been set free” (Appy 2015 p 236). To compare the return of Vietnam veterans to the return of the hostages was a rhetorically genius way to compare the liberal use of the label “hero,” a title that was easily thrown on the hostages for doing virtually nothing (other than surviving an ordeal), as opposed to the Vietnam War veterans who not so long prior sacrificed their lives to fight in a war most of them considered to be pointless. The lack of celebration for the veterans compared to the overwhelming public celebration for the return of the hostages clearly demonstrates how and why the events and sentiments of the 1980s unfolded the way they did. As the first war the U.S. publicly lost, there were collaborative efforts to create a usable narrative of the conflict through

texts and media. Sources of entertainment, like comics and film, altered the narrative as a way to create a memory of the conflict that reinvigorated the Vietnam veteran as champions of democracy that fought to defend constitutional principles and their people.

When the previously mentioned hostages were publicly acknowledged as heroes and received a grandiose return home, it was a slap on the face to Vietnam War veterans and it became the root of much public debate. The deconstruction, then the later attempts of reconstruction of the term “hero,” encapsulates the complexities surrounding our national definition of a hero and what one must do to deserve such a label. Appy explains the way in which society realized their failure to praise their brave Vietnam heroes and tried to then compensate for leaving them in the periphery of society. Veterans were first seen as symbols and painful reminders of the war and were later transformed by societal pressures to be embraced, and acknowledged, as heroes with a well deserved welcome home, even though it was years later. The 1980s overall was an attempt to discard the idea that the veterans of Vietnam represent the war, but rather represent men who were simply serving their country and deserve homage. Using current events and the media to “make” soldiers heroes, and changing the narrative, played a key role in the public’s ability to accept the idea that they can support the troops but not the war, thus adding a new complex layer to the collective memory of the Vietnam War.

Methodology: The Consequences of Postwar Silence

In the late 1970s - early 80s talk about forms of commemoration began to emerge, as did talk about the merit of the war. Perennial questions like what history should be told, how it should be told, and who should tell it began to surface as citizens began asking questions regarding how a memorial should situate itself in American wartime remembrance. Commemorating the tragedies during the Vietnam era through memorials induced a great deal of controversy rather than consensus. These public memorials represent national identity and

history. Through an analysis of the debates sparked around the erection of the National Vietnam Veteran Memorial in Washington D.C., American refusal to confront American defeat and loss in Vietnam becomes apparent. Denial of defeat and postponing any potential of closure until the 80s led to inevitable shifts in American collective memory, in an effort to tailor the narrative in a way that portrays the United States in a better light. Studying American national memory and the Vietnam War is useful for understanding United States national identity, reputation, and foreign relations - mainly due to the way the field explicates patterns in connection with American projections of power.

Furthermore, the fight around memory indicates the desire to control the narrative and make alterations suitable to a particular agenda. The opinions of those in favor and those opposed were published by major media outlets like newspapers, magazines, and on national television. I used these different arenas of news and information to locate my data, the bulk of which came from newspaper and magazine articles. I use my data, being direct quotes from the debate around the Memorial, to emphasize polarized sentiments around the war's purpose and meaning, while also demonstrating the importance of commemoration to a nation and its people. The debate portrays the nation's desire to rewrite the narrative and maintain control over memory. The debates that rose around the Vietnam Veteran Memorial indicate the desire amongst different parties to gain control of the war narrative and how the memory of Vietnam should be situated in American wartime memory.

Data Analysis: Commemorating Defeat

This section will provide a behind the scenes look at the developmental stages of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial and conduct a deep analysis of the nationwide debate that sparked around its design and creation, all the while showing how these polarized sentiments indicate the national desire to rewrite the narrative. The Vietnam Veteran Memorial, or the VVM, emerged

from a delayed realization that a concrete form of commemoration was needed to recognize those that fought and died for the United States. As the country continued to make sense of the war, no American was able to disagree that veterans were a tangible reminder of the horrors that occurred in Vietnam. The main goal was to memorialize, in a neutral way, the men that fought and died for their country. Noncontroversial even in its name, being called the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as opposed to the Vietnam War Memorial (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, 392). The memorial was carefully decided to be a Veteran Memorial as the government authorized a memorial for the veterans, not for the war. Its construction was a long process marred by controversy as its creators were challenged in the economic, political, and public spheres. These institutions wanted a say in the production of the memorial to gain control of the national narrative, which is apparent throughout the development of the VVM. The red tape put in place by politicians, the funding challenges, and the heated debates that surfaced in social spheres during the making of the memorial puts an emphasis on the country's desire to dominate the collective memory of Vietnam.

This section observes the ways in which memory and a national narrative are influenced by a nation's respective political institution and public discourse. The Vietnam Veteran Memorial was used as a portal for American identity to rework itself within history. Reconfiguring the narrative of what happened in Vietnam was a way to meet political agendas, to strengthen a weakened national identity, and to unify the American people. Cultural debates that sparked around the construction of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial in Washington D.C. unveiled truths about the internal conflict in post Vietnam War America stemming from denial, grief, and an unawareness in regards to moving forward. The significance behind the obstacles that surfaced during the planning of the monument, mainly the contest and political barriers, reveal the layers of complexity behind the process of constructing a national memorial that would be remembered for generations to come.

Through an analysis of the debate and differing opinions Americans had on the creation of the monument it becomes clear that the United States government was not the only key actor trying to interfere with the collective memory of Vietnam. This battle of memory extended to military personnel, families of deceased soldiers, veterans, and even regular civilians who were not directly affected by the horrors of war. The narrative of the Vietnam War has been susceptible to manipulation as a result of the delayed response, as a coping mechanism, as a means to unify a deeply divided nation, and as a way to maintain a strong national image. Scholars such as Nguyen, Ehrenhaus, and McMahon have demonstrated a nation's obligation to remember in the wake of war. The mentioned scholars note the difficulties that arise when commemorating a difficult past, which may seem inappropriate to remember yet necessary for closure.

Commemorating tragedies from the Vietnam era through devices like memorials induced a great deal of controversy rather than consensus. My work aligns with and builds upon the work of Ehrenhaus who examines the resurgence of signs of closure that arose after a period of postwar silence. Another notable scholar is Viet Thanh Nguyen who argues that this is a war where the losers wrote the story, emphasizing the notion that America altered the narrative of the Vietnam War in order to fit the heroic self-proclaimed national image. The delayed reaction to defeat in Vietnam impacted both the construction of the National Memorial and post-Vietnam presidential rhetoric by allowing the American people to strategize how they would approach and remember their humiliating defeat. Presidents in postwar America paid particular attention to their rhetoric and the general discourse around Vietnam. Presidential rhetoric and the shifts in tone around the Vietnam War parallel the shifting national memory, as the story begins to be tailored in a way that is more favorable to the United States. When observing these presidential shifts in tone, such as speaking of the war with pride rather than embarrassment, it becomes evident how this rhetoric can mold the way citizens view and remember the war. The political

sphere also created obstacles for the creators of the VVM, as they refused to comply with the government's wishes. The controversy that arose around the construction and design of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial portrays America's struggle to cope with defeat in the wake of war and the desire to reframe the story for future generations.

A national narrative is at the core of a nation's identity. If manipulated, the narrative could serve as an important tool for politicians as they attempt to influence political attitudes. Returning back to presidential rhetoric, rhetorical strategies used following the war in Vietnam reveals the desire to control the nation's narrative, a desire that is magnified when the memorial planning began. It is worth noting that the VVM was signed off by Carter but erected during Reagan's presidency. Reagan's positive approach to remembering Vietnam resonated with the American public because it was exactly what they wanted and needed to hear as a way to cope with the humiliating defeat. Reagan highlighted American achievements during the war, drawing out moments that conveyed sacrifice and evoked a sense of patriotism.

With the end of a war comes remembrance, often in the form of commemoration, which poses great challenges as it influences societal perceptions of its past. The American people were not accustomed to defeat so they were stepping in unprecedented territory postwar, without knowing how to proceed. Most if not all monuments in the United States prior to Vietnam were celebrating former victories and portrayed American soldiers as victorious heroes. Traditional commemorative devices of war took the form of many structures including buildings, engraved granite monoliths and obelisks, and heroic soldier statues. War commemorations are distinct thanks to their height, size, and lightness of color (Doubek 2015). When traditional practices are rejected and a new memorial form is adopted, like with the VVM, questions rise around what that new form seeks to represent (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, 382). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial incorporates an event considered more shameful, due to the controversies

around the war and the resulting defeat, into the public sphere with a commemorative design unlike any other thus agitating an already hostile American public.

The Making of the Vietnam Memorial

In 1979 a group of former officers and enlisted men teamed up and established a nonprofit corporation to build a Vietnam Veteran Memorial (“Jan Scruggs”). While it is impossible to forget a defeat, “a nation's people must find ways to redeem those who died for their country to make defeat honorable. This can be done by honoring the individuals who fought rather than the country's lost cause” (Mayo 1988, p. 170). In the fall of 1980, it was surveyed that 81% of veterans and 86% of adult non veterans were of the opinion that American soldiers were unfortunately a “part of a war that went bad” (Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz 1991). Nevertheless, debate sparked around the nation on whether or not Vietnam veterans could be honored regardless of the merit of war and how they should be remembered. Was the memorial to be evocative, where the visitor could draw their own conclusions, or was it to be didactic? Most importantly, who would get the honor of designing the memorial?

Executive director of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial Fund, or VVMF, Robert Doubek explains the number of offers to design the memorial, many of these offers being free of charge. Despite sponsors and funding being a main obstacle, the founders of the VVMF remained adamant about finding a design selection process that would prevent criticism concerning which “side” got to create the national memorial (Doubek 2015). In an effort to manage the deluge, they held a nationwide competition that would allow applicants to anonymously submit their designs no matter their architectural experience. A panel of judges, consisting of prestigious designers and artists, were gathered to select a design that would be erected in Washington D.C. to commemorate the Vietnam War. The VVMF held an open competition which received over 1,000 proposals (Doubek 2015). The publicized guidelines for the project was that it must

include all the names of veterans killed in Vietnam and it can not make a political statement. There were four publicised competition criteria for the design: it must include the names of soldiers who died or went missing, it must be reflective and contemplative in character, and it needs to be harmonious with the environment in which it is built. The final and most important obligation of the memorial, for the sake of this section, is that the design must be apolitical in nature (“History of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial” 2020). The judges unanimously selected the proposal of twenty one year old Yale student, Maya Lin.

Lin submitted drawings of her design along with an essay detailing the goal behind her structure was to allow "... each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss. For death is in the end a personal and private matter and the area contained within this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning" (VVMF NEWS 1981). When the VVMF first publicized the winning submission, it was greeted with much anger and hostility. NPR even reported the project “needed public relations crisis managers” (Inskeep 2015). Jan Scruggs, credited with getting the memorial built, noted that upon seeing Lin’s design he knew it would be tough to explain. The mention of public relation’s managers was to help in addressing questions in regards to the shape, color, and height. In an interview with PBS Maya Lin describes her impulse to cut into the earth with her design, as if cutting deep into the politically sacred land of the nation’s capital (“Becoming American”). The act of opening up the earth is symbolic as it requires aggressive force and the open wound that it inflicts will remain like a scar to a nation's memory. This initial pain and violence is the parallel to that of the nation, pain that will heal overtime. This concept ties back to theories of Keith Beattie, author of *The Scar That Binds*, who examines the implications of wounds on society and what it takes to expedite the healing process. Beattie’s theory was that in making a metaphor of a wounded nation, it becomes known that the state is weak, and at a loss of power. What happens with the construction of the memorial is the country acknowledging their wounds and giving the space for the healing

process to begin.

The steps taken to plan and construct the memorial unveil the United States' inability to create a uniform interpretation of the past as it had done with previous wars. A juxtaposition emerges that highlights the national desire to create a structure reflective of the uniqueness of this conflict while conversely to create a design that recognizes the ways in which the Vietnam War bore resemblance to prior wars. Against the backdrop of previous wars, the conflict in Vietnam was unique because it was divisive, morally questionable, widely televised, and resulted in defeat. It resembled other wars as it brought forth traditional values such as sacrifice, bravery, loyalty, and honor. In trying to commemorate a unique war, the judges and Maya Lin's supporters considered her design to be revolutionary in the way in which it met all the criteria and managed to mend together the war's contrasting features (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, 381). Maya Lin herself went on to note that "Many earlier memorials were propagandized statements about the victory, the issues, the politics, and not about the people who served and died" (National Geographic, May 1985, p. 557). Lin wanted her memorial design to be an honest reflection of the reality of war and stay focused on the veterans rather than the domestic and international conflict.

The initial hostility was aimed at Maya Lin herself for being of Asian descent. The VVMF also received heavy backlash for selecting a young female student with no war experience. Maya Lin was subjected to the harsh racist remarks from the American public after being selected as the winning design. It is worth noting that five prestigious publications misspelled Maya Lin's name. *Time*: Maya Yin Lin (November 9, 1981); *Washington Post*: Maya Ling Lin (November 12, 1984); *National Review* and *New Republic*: Maya Yang Lin (December 1981 and 1982); *U.S. News and World Report*: Maya Ling Yin (November 22, 1982); all of these variations of Lin's name show a lack of care and attention (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, 402). Pat Buchanan, a columnist, along with other angry Americans made allegations of a juror

being a Communist. Ross Perot, one of the largest contributors to the VVMF, withdrew his support and expressed he would do everything in his power to prevent the construction of her design, calling Maya Lin an “egg roll” (Brigham 1999). Additionally, there was a Pentagon official who made reference to the fact that Maya Lin was of Chinese descent in his criticism of her memorial (Hess 1983, p. 121). Questions of race began to surface and people were wondering whether or not it was appropriate for an individual of Asian descent to create a memorial for Americans that fought and died against Asians. Many Americans found it odd to have what they considered to be a child constructing their national memorial, especially a child of Asian descent when a large quantity of the population was putting blame on Vietnam for getting them involved in the conflict. Although these remarks are surface level to a much larger, deeper argument, it demonstrates how the Vietnam Veteran Memorial serves as a painful reminder of loss and defeat, which politicians and elites want to render less severe through alterations of the war narrative. This memorial was strictly in the hands of the War Memorial Fund, so the government was unable to touch it as a way to prevent conflict, yet they were able to get in the way and make it difficult for the memorial’s construction.

The biggest issues encountered during planning and building were finding sponsors, raising money, and choosing the design. Once Lin’s design was selected the challenge of funding remained. Having a memorial that was apolitical in nature was a serious condition that sponsors expected the VVMF to meet including organizations like the Reserve Officers Association, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Marine Corps League, and Retired Officers Association (Doubek 2015). Political neutrality was essential in order to obtain and maintain financial support. Scruggs affirmed the Memorial would symbolize national unity while also serving as a focal point for American citizens irregardless of their political and personal views" (U.S. House of Representatives 1980, p. 4805). The construction of the monument was apoliticized to the extent of determining the very fabric of which it was made. Maya Lin explains in an interview with

92nd Street Y that she could not use granite from Canada because draft dodgers went there and she was not allowed to use black Swedish granite because draft evaders also fled there (2018). They had to use Indian black granite to ensure a neutrality in the materials used to bring these memorial plans to fruition. Creating a monument that was politically neutral was of the utmost importance to the creators of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial, yet debate still rose around the proposed design as many were insistent that the abstention of a war statement ultimately amounted to an anti-war statement.

While being interviewed on NPR, Scruggs recited some of the most common questions from the public about the unconventional design like, "Why is it that every monument in Washington is white but this one's black," and, "Why is it that every monument in Washington is rising into the air and this one is buried beneath the ground" (Inskeep 2015). When being interviewed for Art in America Maya Lin stated, "In a world of phallic memorials that rise upward... I didn't set out to conquer the earth, or overpower it the way Western man usually does. I don't think I've made a passive piece, but neither is it a memorial to the idea of war" (Hess 1983, p. 121). Scruggs went on to say during his interview with NPR that the controversy around the design "...almost killed the whole project" (Inskeep 2015). The government was prepared to put an end to the project all together until everyone agreed on a compromise: a second statue. During the public outrage that followed the publication of Lin's design, critics asserted that a "real" memorial was needed for the Vietnam War, one that better aligned with the traditional war monuments of the past. This was seemingly impossible given the stern order to maintain political neutrality and in order to create a design closer to the traditional genre the narrative of the war would need to undergo shifts in order to glorify and romantancise what occurred.

In the beginning stages, Reagan's secretary of the Interior James Watt suspended the construction by refusing to proceed with a building permit. The government was overseeing the

project very carefully, nearly taking the building site hostage. The public and government alike were pressuring for additions, mainly due to their desire to procure a war they could not win. The compromise conceived was to add an additional monument, the Three Servicemen and an American flag, which was meant to offset the perpetuated humiliation of the wall. Sculptor Frederick Hart, who had placed third in the original competition for VVM, created the bronze statue of the Three Servicemen to appease the enraged veterans and critics during the creation of the Veteran Memorial. In hopes of creating a statue that was truly representative of American soldiers, Hart interviewed dozens of veterans, read books, and watched film footage and documentaries about the war (Hess 1987). Hart stated that he wanted to execute a statue that "bespeaks the bonds of love and sacrifice that is the nature of men at war" (Hess 1987). His statue depicts three young, armed soldiers that are identifiably of different ethnic groups as they have distinguishing features. Seeming as though they are returning from active duty, the soldiers are peering towards the wall, linking the two together as one.

Upon revealing his statue, Hart declared, "I see the Wall as a kind of ocean, a sea of sacrifice that is overwhelming and nearly incomprehensible in its sweep of names. I place these figures upon the shore of that sea, gazing upon it, standing vigil before it, reflecting the human face of it, the human heart" (*The Vietnam Wall Controversy, 1981-82*). Elizabeth Hess closely examines the monuments of Lin and Hart, and provides a detailed report of the debates that surfaced around the two. While one monument is abstract, the other one is realistic, thus making them antithetical to one another. It is for this reason that Hess believes the two monuments foster a setting that not only polarizes but politicizes them (Hess 1987). Hart compared his own work to that of Lin, acknowledging a deeper understanding of Vietnam veterans, having studied them for three years. He noted, "I became close friends with many vets, drank with them in bars" while conversely, "Lin's piece is a serene exercise in contemporary art done in a vacuum with no knowledge of the subject" (Hess 1983, p. 124). Hart's personal experience with veterans

translates over in his piece as an artistic privilege as it was approved and appreciated by the veterans. In an effort to mollify those in opposition of Maya Lin's memorial design, the addition of The Three Servicemen was approved, thus emphasizing the deep societal tensions and desires to conquer this war of memory.

Veterans insisted that the addition of Hart's statue provided them with what they believed the wall was missing: the nobility behind an American serving and sacrificing their life for the nation. A piece that could combine battle, sacrifice, and the country all together is what many in opposition were looking for. The U.S. House of Representatives gathered the following statistics which reveal a great deal about how many people were in favor of the addition and how many were opposed. After conducting surveys amongst Vietnam veterans, veterans' families, veterans of previous wars, and nonveterans, it was found that at least 85% of each group surveyed were in favor of adding a flag and statue on the Memorial grounds (U.S. House of Representatives 1982, pp. 5107-8). With each group having the majority in favor of these additions it reflects the importance to Americans behind how the war was to be framed and remembered. Vietnam veterans seemed to be the most passionate about the changes on the grounds, gauging by the strong reactions to Lin's design itself. The public discourse that emerged around the statue, and flag accompanying it, are reflective of deeply rooted national anxieties and insecurities which were exacerbated by Lin's design. Concerns around national strength, heroism, and masculinity were amongst the most known. While the wars prior received commemorative devices that followed a certain genre of monument, Maya Lin's proposal was one that the American public did not know how to make sense of right away. Traditionally, commemorative war monuments call for an atmosphere of masculinity, heroism, and strength; Ehrenhaus theorizes these forms of commemoration seem almost inappropriate and perhaps would even be weakened due to the defeat in the war. The additions could be perceived as palliatives to the uncertainty around the masculinity of American soldiers in memory, soldiers that were being victimized by and large in

political rhetoric and cultural works. These national insecurities are crucial to note when studying the memory shifts in the United States post Vietnam War, as this instance shows how the desire to accommodate the past to the needs of the present is in commonplace and inevitably shifts the narrative throughout the years.

American Debate Over the Memorial

Many Americans debated over the way Vietnam should be remembered, since some took great pride in America's effort to defend South Vietnam while others took great shame in American involvement overseas. The monument then became a paradox as it invoked both national unity and strife during the resurgence of remembering Vietnam in the 80s. Debate surfaced around the construction of this particular memorial due its unique design, placement, and creator. The debate that sparked around the creation of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial portrays a divided nation concerned about the way future generations will view the war and its veterans. Americans were also concerned about conveying a message of humiliation and defeat, thus weakening American national identity. Arguments posed by those in favor and in opposition of the memorial will serve as a means to examine America's desire to reclaim a lost war.

This section will seek to conduct a deep analysis of the debate that rose around the creation of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial and the opposing stances the public took. Stances that portray tensions around how the war and its veterans should be remembered and the significance that collective memory has on national identity. Looking at those in favor, James J. Kilpatrick was published in *The National Review* expressing his support for the memorial stating, "You would prefer a piece of 'suitable sculpture,' on the model of memorials to Gettysburg... Bosh! Such memorials gather moss in every village square from Mobile to Manchester. Washington is full of suitable sculptures, and with perhaps half a dozen exceptions they are dreadful -- pedestrian examples of the stonecarver's skill. These 'suitable sculptures' arouse no emotion

whatever. The proposed memorial, believe me, will pack an unforgettable wallop" (1981). Aside from his use of colorful diction, his message remains clear. He makes mention of the ongoing debate between a traditional didactic styled memorial and the participatory style of Lin's that leaves room for individual interpretation and emotion. Wolf Von Eckardt was also very vocal with his support for the memorial. Published in the *Washington Post*, he explains how he did not expect a worthy memorial design but Lin surpassed his expectations. He writes about the participatory nature of the monument explaining that "It is... a direct evocation of an emotional experience, which, one way or another, is what art is all about. Being unconventional --as unconventional as Stonehenge or the Eiffel Tower -- the design may not instantly be grasped. . . . But once Lin's concept is experienced, it is hard to imagine any better solution to the problems a Vietnam Veterans Memorial poses" (1981). Eckardt went on to write in *Time*, "None of the runners-up, however sincerely conceived, deserves a place near the Lincoln Memorial. While there is nothing sacred about the Mall, the majesty of this green carpet demands dignified simplicity, if not nobility, of any newcomer. Lin's design meets that demand" (1981). This statement goes to show that American's were equally interested in maintaining the aesthetic nature of the Mall, which was one of the criteria for contest applicants being that their design must be harmonious with the environment in which it is placed.

The New York Times made clear they were in favor of Lin's design on more occasions than one. In the article "Remembering Vietnam," complex ideas about the significance of heroism and art were detailed to have undergone great shifts after Vietnam. Explaining the lack of consensus and understanding around the war's purpose they state, "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" (1981). Veterans killed in the war were a tangible reminder of the tragedy that occurred in Vietnam, so many of

those in favor of the monument lay their focus on the way the Memorial successfully commemorates the veterans lost. This same New York Times article stated, A memorial that emphasizes the names without offering any conclusion about the war reflects the truth about how the nation remembers Vietnam. Critics of the memorial would like something more assertive -- a Vietnam version of marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima, perhaps. That would create a shallow monument to politics. The Vietnam dead deserve better" (1981). Touching on the popular desire to have a more traditional form of a war memorial, the New York Times supports Lin's design as it leaves room for reflection rather than being assertive. More importantly, the idea of a "shallow monument to politics" aligns with the work of Michael Kammen who argues that all nations have a propensity to alter historical events in order to cope and save face (Kammen 1991). His theory that the past is manipulated as a means to meet demands of contemporary culture and mold the present could be applied to the Wall as it intentionally omits any historical facts, resulting from strategic remembering that could lead to national forgetting. This ties in with Nguyen's notions of how a nation decides to include or exclude when writing their story, and how that affects the national memory and identity.

Those in opposition viewed the design as an anti-war statement due to its unconventional design. The shape of the V was perceived to be a subtle symbol of the two-finger peace sign symbol which was an emblem of the hippie movement, an open book reading the names of the dead, or even a "v" for victory (Hess 1983, pp. 121, 12). Phyllis Schlafly, a known conservative attorney, regarded the memorial as more of "a tribute to Jane Fonda" than one memorializing the tragedy in Vietnam (Hess 1983, pp. 121, 12). One highly-decorated Marine, James Webb, referred to the design as a "wailing wall for anti-draft demonstrators" (Hess 1983). Another veteran called the memorial "too passive," almost an underhand apology for the war (Brigham 1999). Two journals that almost never come to an agreement in terms of politics, The New Republic and The National Review, published their opinion that instead of honoring the veterans,

this memorial gives an impression that these soldiers were "the victims of some monstrous traffic accident" (Marling and Silberman 1987, p. 1). Although these remarks are surface level to a much larger, deeper argument, it demonstrates how those in opposition of Maya Lin's memorial design felt it did not accurately depict the heroism of soldiers and the grandeur of war that was present in President Reagan's rhetoric.

One leading opponent of the design recognized the national strife around the war, yet he explained that history can be reassessed and that "a piece of art remains, as a testimony to a particular moment in history, and we are under a solemn obligation to get that moment down as correctly as possible" (Scruggs and Swerdlow 1985, p. 94). Numerous detractors pointed out the issue with the memorial lacking context and patriotism and how that would affect the way future generations remember the conflict. In a letter to the editor in the *Washington Post*, it reads "...we are going to have a Vietnam Veterans Memorial that does not even identify where or in what war the men and women served and died. That's recognition?" (1981) Michael Lind explains in his article "The Rise of Misguided Memorials," that the Memorial's very nature is an insult. Writing that "'public memorials need to be classical: timeless, simple, and based in history,' the memorial is bound to lose meaning and be misunderstood as time passes" (1998). *The Wall Street Journal* went so far as to point out that the simplicity behind the monument and the lack of context provided "...robs the dead of a good measure of their dignity and allows us to slide into the most dishonorable kind of forgetfulness" (1981). This forgetfulness during times of forced remembering is a concept that scholars Jenny Edkins and Viet Thanh Nguyen grappled with in their work, both of them emphasizing the potential behind memory practices to promote change necessary to prevent future conflicts. In forgetting and not including the context necessary to understand what happened to those veterans in Vietnam, many in opposition would argue that the future generations will forcibly forget or greatly misunderstand the sacrifice these men made.

Charles Krauthammer argues in the *New Republic* that the memorial fails to give context

and meaning to the deaths of the veterans and suffering of their families. Krauthammer famously states that "We do not memorialize bus accidents, which by nature are contextless, meaningless. To treat the Vietnam dead like the victims of some monstrous traffic accident is more than a disservice to history" (1981). He interestingly points out that the memorial does nothing other than point out the dead, nothing about the individuals, only the dead veteran's names. Vietnam veteran Scott Brewer stated at the CFA meeting that the memorial accomplishes very little and that "no memorial would be a better alternative" (1981). *The National Review*, also compared the names engraved on the Wall to a list of traffic accidents as the names listed on the granite slate could belong to anyone from any incident (September 18, 1981, p. 1064). An article titled "Stop That Monument," published in the *National Review* was another to compare the dead veterans to victims of a tragic traffic accident in stating, "Our objection to this Orwellian glop does not issue from any philistine objection to new conceptions in art. It is based upon the clear political message of this design. The design says that the Vietnam War should be memorialized in black, not in the white marble of Washington. The mode of listing the names makes them individual deaths, not deaths in a cause; they might as well have been traffic accidents" (1981). This article clearly points out a dissatisfaction with the general design being that it differs from the typical genre of war monument, and the way in which it commemorates the veterans as individuals with no backstory or context. *USA Today* conceded that "nowhere on the memorial was there to be any reference to where or why these people died, and no flag or patriotic symbol of any kind would indicate that honor or dedication to duty were involved in their deaths." (March 1983, p. 70). Another main opposer of the memorial was James Webb who wrote in a letter to Grady Clay, "Understatement is not called for when we are dealing with the heroic and honorable loss of life, whether you believed in the cause or not... Is there a reason that [the memorial] should be black and flagless?" The lack of patriotism along with the lack of individual uniqueness caused public outrage as many felt the dead veterans were being dissolved in the nation's history in an effort to

change the narrative and hide the embarrassment that was national defeat.

One of the more vocal objectors to Lin's design was Tom Carhart, who served in the war and graduated from West Point. He described the monument design to be "a degrading ditch of shame and sorrow" (Carhart 1991). The West Point graduate went on to characterize the proposal as the "most insulting and demeaning memorial to our experience that was possible" (Hess 1983). Carhart had also entered the contest and opened up the argument around whether or not this was a memorial for the war at home or the war in Vietnam. His exhortations were widely met with agreement from fellow veterans. The veterans condemned the jurors and architect for having no real military experience, particularly no direct experience in Vietnam. They felt as though people who did not serve have no place to dictate how their memorial should be remembered. Tom Carhart published an opinion piece in the New York Times explaining the distinction between the war of ideology fought on U.S. soil and the military war fought in Vietnam "...where 57,000 Americans died and whose veterans the Fund is authorized by Congress to 'recognize and honor'" (Carhart 1981). The war waged on the home front was the one that many veterans felt was being memorialized, rather than their own sacrifices and experience. Carhart goes on to note that "The jurors know nothing of the real war in Vietnam: the television portrayal was far from adequate... The net result is that the design the jury chose as the winner was necessarily a function of their perception of the war they lived through in America" (Carhart 1981). This controversy, and the stance of these angry veterans, is a testament to the fact that this war was fought in three parts: abroad, on the home front, and in memory. These men fought for the country and are then forced to fight for how they are publicly celebrated and remembered. This begs the question, how should a nation remember and how does that impact national identity and foreign policy? One disappointed congressman from Illinois, Henry Hyde, advised that war memorials such as this one are "too important to leave simply to artists and architects" (Brigham 1999).

The backlash that Maya Lin and the WMF faced is exemplary of a nation torn by political ideologies and unable to reconcile with their ultimate defeat. "The names unify while other words about the war divide" (Isaacs 1997). One veteran explained the memorial as being "neither defined nor definable," thanks to its ambiguous nature which enables the viewer to draw their own conclusions around an event that was fiercely debated (Brigham 1999). While there were many veterans that were upset about the design there were also veterans who were pleased with it. Some defined it as "perfect" and others described it as a holy space. Some viewed this as a place of reconciliation, one that closes the door to the war in Vietnam and what could also be seen as an attempt to close the door to the war on memory.

As the WMF and Maya Lin unveiled their upcoming project plans for the Vietnam Veteran Memorial, madness soon followed which was a clear reflection of American reluctance to commemorate their defeat. Divisions that were present on the homefront during the Vietnam War were deepening as the opposing parties disputed the way in which the war should be remembered and the role they perceived America had in that war. Determining America's role and purpose in the war are also topics that U.S. presidents attempted to tackle following the conflict. Assigning the war a deeper meaning could affirm the heroic acts of the soldiers while also justifying the nation's presence in Vietnam. The memorial is a key contributor towards national amnesia as it incited widespread debate during a period where politicians were pressuring reconciliation and the revival of a defamed national image. The emergence of war memorials serves a pathway to rebuild a strong image of the modern state, while also unifying the public. The Vietnam Veteran Memorial and presidential rhetoric have been used as a means to change the perspective of Vietnam, bringing it from an unjust tragedy to a noble victory thus wiping America's record clean of a defeat. Comparing American intervention in Vietnam with widely accepted noble causes such as WWII, where the key players that were deemed good guys and bad guys were more evident, is a way to transform public perception from a loss to a win.

The Vietnam War was a significant event in U.S. history that needs to be remembered, especially when Presidents propose new foreign policy agendas. Memorials and other sites of commemoration deserve to be free from political influences attempting to reclaim the lost war.

In the late 1970s into the 1980s, Walter Dean Burnham studied a shift of foundational American principles, values, and character observing it to be a "reactionary revitalization movement" (1982). As scholars such as Ehrenhaus, Nguyen, and McMahon have observed, the end of a war calls for the need to remember. The wall in Vietnam was a source of rancor and garnered an overwhelming amount of attention, as individuals of the social and political sphere fought over how the war in Vietnam should be remembered. American veterans, politicians, and citizens of all backgrounds were very vocal about their opinion of Maya Lin's memorial design ranging from people finding it to be the lowest form of an insult to others viewing it as a revolutionary architectural masterpiece. These polarized sentiments were indicative of the social and political divides in the U.S. at the time but also exemplifies the national fight to gain control of the narrative.

Scholar Peter Ehrenhaus uses the theoretical framework that memorials restrict and narrow interpretations of a nation's history and it forces a fixed story onto those who visit them (Ehrenhaus 1988). The Wall is recognizably different as it rejects institutional influence and accepts interpretations from the viewer, thus creating a participatory, active experience. Similarly, Jenny Edkins uses the war in Vietnam as a case study to support her theory that memory is something that society does and creates through socially constructed processes, like memorials, rather than something that a society automatically has. She argues that memories exist only on the plane of the present, anything thereafter must be challenged in terms of how valid it is. Edkins expresses concern around the role of commemorative devices in society and how they have the potential to serve to reinforce state power and nationhood. With this in mind, Edkins explores the implications of such commemorations in terms of rhetoric, politics, and

identity all of which can be seen through the polarized sentiments and debates around the Vietnam Veteran Memorial. Edkins' core argument is that memory practices have the potential to serve as a way to promote change and prevent similar future occurrences, similar to Nguyen who insists that holistically remembering the Vietnam War could remind the U.S. of the dangers of intervening abroad.

While the debates are a sign of polarized sentiments and the war to rewrite the story, the veteran memorial in its very design is being debated as a source that is skewing memory. Some view it as an apolitical necessity to mourn lost soldiers while others view the structure as having no context or meaning, a structure whose history will be lost ultimately leading to memory loss and the inability to promote the change that Nguyen and Edkins advocate for through commemoration. Hagopian argues that many commemorative devices, like monuments, have a tendency of eschewing particular elements of war such as its meaning. Undesirable, toxic memories are difficult to restrict in traditional memorial forms but they are equally difficult to remember in public memorial forms which explains the demand for an apolitical Vietnam Veteran Memorial. Hagopian reminds the reader that parts of history that a nation forgets can often be just as important as the parts remembered (Hagopian 2009). Debate around the memorial was debate around how it should be remembered, who should be remembered and why. The Vietnam Veteran Memorial in D.C. was to have an influential role on national remembrance which is why different parties fought to gain control of the narrative.

Lin's memorial has the ability to commemorate a darker history by reflecting the surrounding society and allowing for interaction with the Memorial itself. The memories that people invent when visiting the Wall are always mediated by representations of cultural memory such as media portrayal and personal perceptions of the war. Encouraging a personal reconstruction of the past leaves room for individuals and society to cope and reconcile in the way best suited for them but also leaves war memories vulnerable and susceptible to change as

individuals will remember narratives heavily influenced by their cultural context. National monuments serve as public reminders of the nation's history and identity. In the case of the Vietnam war, it is a point in American history that many would consider unreflective of American values and identity.

Conclusion: The Inevitable Forging of War Memories

In the wake of war, the U.S. did not widely celebrate American soldiers returning home from Vietnam or give them the title of hero, which was applied to World War II veterans and even the hostages held in Iran (Appy 2015). Questions arose concerning how such a humiliating, scandalous war should be remembered. The American people and their political leaders wanted to find a way to fit this national failure into the American narrative. Stunned by defeat, the American public remained silent for a couple years before beginning to produce war related works, expressions, and forms of commemoration. The war was an enormous failure in terms of loss of lives, money, energy, and the loss of America's reputation as an unstoppable force. This suspended the grieving period in the wake of war, thus halting the potential for closure and rendering memories vulnerable to manipulation, which caused a shift in the narrative.

National Memories are especially impressionable during periods where the identity of the country is insecure, weakened by defeat. This paper traced the dangers that accompany a political and social conscience molded by manipulated memories through an analysis of post Vietnam War America and its long lasting effects on the national psyche. A war fought on the international and domestic front, resulting in a humiliating defeat, this paper examined parallels between public memory shifts and history by observing which experiences national narratives include or exclude and how selective memory influences politics. The manipulation of memories was studied first through shifts in presidential rhetoric post war and how that resonated with the

American people. It was then primarily analyzed by the lengthy and convoluted process that occurred to build the Vietnam Veteran Memorial in the 1980s.

The data section provided a behind the scenes look at the making of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial. A process which put history on trial as citizens began to ask questions regarding what narrative should be told, how it should be told, and who should tell it. Perennial questions like these were at the heart of the controversy around the making of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial. Opposition towards the proposed design and its creator came about during the developmental stages of the memorial. As an array of vigorous viewpoints emerged, some of the fiercest opponents like Tom Carhart drew government officials, the memorial's financial supporters, and the American public into the debate. The growing controversy nearly caused the project to be shut down until all sides settled on a compromise. The Vietnam Veteran Memorial forced the United States to negotiate how the Vietnam War should be represented and how the nation should remember a lost war.

This ties back to the literature review section since scholarship on public memory demands that there must be an understanding of the complex and universally contested processes that society undergoes when forming devices of commemoration. Scholars like Papayanis, Appy, Kammen, McMahon, and Nguyen make note that a nation's history is rarely pure and unfiltered, but is forged as a way to meet modern day needs which has a formidable impact on decisions related to foreign policy. Without reconciliation, the trauma of Vietnam became nearly impossible to forget while the true war stories were nearly impossible to remember, rendering commemoration a widely contested subject in the eighties. Since American loss in Vietnam was a blow to the public's sense of common purpose and core values, American's were left assessing the war's merit. U.S. presidents tried to retrospectively reconstruct the narrative through rhetorical strategies that were intended to shift the tone towards one of honor and pride. As Ehrenhaus pointed out, a nation needs to grapple with defeat and trauma in one way or another.

When the country was looking to produce forms of commemoration in the 80s, the ways in which the history of Vietnam was represented speaks volumes to the function of history and why it matters to national identity as well as culture.

Through an examination of collective memory around the Vietnam War and the public's methods of coping with defeat, it provides insight into the ever-changing landscape of memories and history. Dominant themes ranging beyond America's cultural terrain are apparent by the great lengths the United States went to in order to redeem the status of an invincible nation and to restore the strong national ego that was shared after World War II. The controversy that emerged in the 80s around how the war should be situated in the nation's history was at the forefront of national conversation and amongst the highest concerns. The controversy that arose around the Vietnam Veteran Memorial, the fine attention on behalf of U.S. presidents through their rhetoric, and the scholarship explaining shifts in collective memory all yield significant truths in regards to the United States national identity and democratic processes around molding history for the pedagogy of future American generations. If the nation is unable to reconcile with their involvement and loss, the conflict will become more difficult to accurately remember and the war related trauma will become impossible to forget.

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