MEMORIALIZING A “FORGOTTEN WAR”
THE KOREAN WAR VETERANS MEMORIAL IN CONTEXT

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Wars represent defining moments in history. They challenge humanity and demand strength in times of loss, confusion, sacrifice, and fear. Even in the years to follow, a war can be psychologically damaging and difficult to comprehend for the soldiers involved and those affected on the home front. Part of the process of healing, understanding and drawing meaning from war is memorializing it. Thus, at the conclusion of these violent conflicts there is a natural human desire to honor those who have served by creating sacred sites of remembrance, reflection, and education.\(^1\) In determining and communicating a war’s meaning through visual language and space, the act of commemorating quickly turns political and controversial. This is especially true on a national scale; how and when a memorial is established greatly impact the perception of the war and its place in history, which in turn affects national identity, consciousness, and memory.\(^2\) Building memorials for soldiers is an honorable and respectable undertaking, but comes with great responsibility.

The design process and completed memorial for the Korean War raise many questions and issues regarding the nature of public commissions and how to visually commemorate a war. Since the Korean War—often called the “Forgotten War”—is a war of which few people have general knowledge, it was imperative for the memorial to educate visitors on the war’s purpose, outcome, and historical significance in order for the soldier’s efforts and sacrifices to be recognized and valued. More importantly, memorials are “acts and gifts that honor particular

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people.” Thus, it was necessary for the memorial to express gratitude by respecting the veterans’s wishes for their site of remembrance. However, the national Korean War Veterans Memorial of 1995 in Washington, D.C., presents a poor design that does not succeed in representing or communicating either of the essential elements mentioned above. In examining the development and visual language of the Korean War Veterans Memorial, in context of America’s monument and memorial tradition, I argue that the failure of the memorial to fulfill its purpose is a result of the democratic nature of its design process and the excessive compromises that were made to resolve conflicting traditional ideals and modernist aesthetics in national commemoration.

Dedicated on July 27, 1995, the Korean War Veterans Memorial is located southeast of the Lincoln Memorial and directly across the reflecting pool from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in Area I of the National Mall (Figure 1). An aerial view of the memorial shows its V-shaped layout, which is formed by two pathways that connect to the Lincoln Memorial (Figure 2). When approaching the site, the visitor looks onto the backs of nineteen stainless steel statues equally spaced in a triangular formation, advancing forward towards a distant flagpole at the intersection of the pathways (Figure 3). At the feet of the men, juniper bushes and granite strips of varying lengths isolate the figures from each other and help close off the area from pedestrians. The grouping of soldiers, also referred to as the “column,” depict distinct ethnicities, military branches, and emotions. Beyond the apex of the triangle, where the flagpole stands and a dedication stone is embedded in the ground, twenty-eight linden trees outline a circular, black granite pool of still water called the “Pool of Remembrance” (Figure 4). A black granite wall

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intersects the right side of the circle, providing a stark backdrop for the words “Freedom is Not Free.” The wall continues down parallel to the statues, increasing in height and decoration. Etched into the surface are the faces of military personnel and support aid based on archived photographs from the war. Known as the “Mural Wall,” the portraits come forward and fade back, producing a layered effect to their collective composition (Figure 5). To add to the optical illusion of the engravings, the polished mural wall reflects the nineteen soldiers, raising their number to thirty-eight. Overall, the memorial has three constituent parts; the soldier sculptures, the reflection pool, and the mural wall.

These obscure, competing features do not communicate in an affective way; as a result the purpose and history of the Korean War continues to lack a clear definition or receive proper recognition. Scholar William Hubbard argues effective memorials must be “readily accessible to our ordinary understanding.” They should not require “esoteric knowledge, no difficult research for us to grasp . . . only our common knowledge and our active imagination.” A memorial needs to express “a graspable message there that repays imagination.” The Korean War Veterans Memorial does not provide the visitor with a comprehensible message nor does it establish itself as a successful architectural and sculptural work. The soldiers, while skillfully executed, evoke uneasiness and lack clarity of purpose. The mural wall is a cliché and too simplistic for contemplation and emotional reaction. The pool’s still water, circular form, and black surface are visually intriguing and encourage reflection, but do not connect or transition well with the other features, making it merely a rest stop for tired visitors. Together these components present the public with a memorial pastiche, an arrangement and mixture of various styles from different time periods, and public art staples, i.e., figural statues, a water feature, and dedication wall. This

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5 Ibid.
is an overwhelming and ineffective approach to commemoration, which lacks visual cohesion and historical clarity.

The design of the Korean War Veterans Memorial was an attempt to satisfy veteran, government, and public groups. At the root of these compromises is the integration of traditional ideals in commemoration with new modernist aesthetics. These two terms, “traditional” and “modernist,” require definition and context in order to understand the complexity of their influence on the memorial. When discussing traditional tastes, I am referring to America’s artistic history in adopting classical examples of representational figures, symmetry, order, allegory, and typically employing white marble as a medium. These stylistic references to the classical period set a precedent for commissioned public art in the United States, where for two centuries heroic monuments of idealized figures and realistically depicted historical events marked the nation’s landscape. Such imagery asserts national stability and power, and is associated with patriotism and democratic values. Thus, “tradition” speaks to the American standard of creating classically inspired memorials and monuments. In contrast, “modernist” describes a move away from realistic representation, a tendency toward abstract and reductive forms, and an interest in alternative mediums. Because modern styles of commemoration lack the type of decoration and symbolism familiar to the public in the past, this new direction has been viewed as valuing introspective and reflective experiences over nationalistic agendas. The Korean War Veterans Memorial attempts to include both styles and ideologies in an affective way, but its dualistic nature obscures the soldiers’ efforts and the significance of the war.

The origins of the Mall developed in the early years of the young republic. Eleven years following the Declaration of Independence, George Washington commissioned architect Pierre L’Enfant to design the nation’s new capital. L’Enfant approached the project with the intention
of transforming the grounds into an influential space that would showcase the nation’s power. However, not much progress was made during the nineteenth century to fulfill L’Enfant’s vision. The Mall’s first permanent installation, the Washington Monument, an impressive 555-foot obelisk, was designed by Robert Mills in 1848, but not completed until 1885. The project’s prolonged construction, due to the Civil War, design disagreements, and lack of funding demonstrated the unavoidable and unanticipated difficulties of creating monumental public art.⁶

In 1902, a redevelopment of the Mall was proposed with the McMillan Plan (named for James McMillan, who chaired the Senate Park Commission), which was influenced by the Chicago Beaux-Arts architect Daniel Burnham. Though the plan was not officially adopted, it guided the evolution of the Mall during the twentieth century. An Act of Congress did establish the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts in 1910, to advise on the transformation of the Mall into a landscape of national symbols.

With the Washington Monument as its central point, the Mall is terminated by the Capitol building (1793-1863) on one end and the Lincoln Memorial (1922) at the other (Figure 6). The addition of the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial in 1924 and the Jefferson Memorial in 1943, further transformed the Mall into a platform to narrate history.⁷ As the Mall evolved, land for other memorial projects was highly sought after and, in 1979, Vietnam veteran Jan Scruggs proposed a memorial for the Vietnam War, which would alter the national memorial landscape.

When Scruggs initiated the project he expressed interest in creating a memorial that sought “collective recovery from the personal and national traumas of the Vietnam War.”⁸ This

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⁷ Ibid., 14.
represented a dramatic change from the presidential monuments, which celebrated American leadership and values. Unlike its neighboring white marble memorials with ornamentation and figural centerpieces, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by Maya Lin is a v-shaped form made of polished black granite that carves out a space in the earth (Figure 7). On the surface, the names of the soldiers who lost their lives are listed chronologically, beginning from the vertex of the two walls ten feet below ground. Instead of glorifying the war, it encouraged reflection and mourning, feelings usually not associated with power or nationalism.

When Lin’s design surfaced in the media, the memorial received harsh criticism from veterans and the general public. Vietnam Veteran Tom Carhart read the memorial’s color as a “black gash of sorrow and shame,” and a Vietnam platoon leader, James Webb, labeled it the “wailing wall.” Its sunken position further provoked interpretations of it as a space of hiding and humiliation. The design’s stark geometric form and lack of representation and symbolism, in contrast to its surrounding traditional heroic memorials, caused some to call it unpatriotic. Furthermore, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial’s visual resemblance to minimal art led critics to believe its “modernist design [was] incomprehensible to the public.” In time the public understood the reflective black surface as engaging and contemplative, and the quiet, removed space to be therapeutic. Within a few years of its dedication in 1982, the memorial’s capacity to heal and offer a space of reflection gained its acceptance. As the controversies and debates about the memorial resided, its ultimate popularity ignited a trend, or what public art scholar Erika Doss has termed a “mania” of memorials throughout the United States. This “mania” describes “an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those

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10 Ibid., 219.
issues in visibly public contexts.” Soon after the completion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, individuals voiced the absence of a memorial for the Korean War, a war that occurred a decade before Vietnam.

A modernist approach to commemoration did not appear on the National Mall until the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which positioned the Korean War Veterans Memorial to make a statement regarding stylistic values in military memorialization. The memorial could have countered the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by returning commemoration to classical conventions and figural focus or continue in the direction of new approaches in layout, form, and space that are characteristic of modern art styles. Instead, the memorial attempted to merge the two and did so in an unsuccessful way.

Since part of my critique of the memorial is its failure to present affectively the Korean War, it is important to understand the war’s historical significance and why the memorial required educational, comprehensible, and cohesive features. The Korean War represented the only time during the Cold War the superpowers—the Soviet Union and the United States—faced each other in direct combat. Following World War II, America and the Western allies wanted to maintain political control in Korea in order to stop the spread of Communism and keep the Soviet Union from gaining more global power. Korea had previously been under Japanese rule, but when Japan surrendered in 1945 to end World War II, the Soviet Union and United States occupied Korea’s north and south, respectively.

The thirty-eighth parallel, where the spilt had occurred, generated great tension during the Cold War. When the North Korean army, with Soviet support, crossed the parallel, President

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Harry Truman viewed the breach as “communist aggression” and called for the United Nations to take action. The UN fought alongside the United States and Western nations, but American troops made up the majority of the anti-communist forces. In October of 1950, the United States and South Korea crossed into North Korea, provoking the Chinese to enter the war in order to protect communism in the region. Fear that the war would escalate into a “World War III” kept both war-weary sides at a stalemate. Eventually in 1953, opponents agreed to an armistice in hopes of resolving the conflict at a later time. However, the divide is still in effect today and continues to impact current American military and political relations with North and South Korea.

Although approximately 54,000 American soldiers were killed, the Korean War is rarely known, discussed, or understood. School curricula spend little or no time teaching children about the war. In contrast to the triumph of World War II and the failure of Vietnam, the Korean War lacks a concise narrative or a decisive conclusion, further emphasizing why the memorial needed to educate the public on the war so they can express gratitude. In recent publications on American memorials, such as Doss’s *Memorial Mania* and Kirk Savage’s *Monument Wars*, the Korean War Veterans Memorial is briefly acknowledged and hardly discussed. This is perhaps because its design and ambiguous narrative do not have a profound impact on its audience. Furthermore, the memorial does not receive the same recognition or elicit the same excitement with the public as other sites on the Mall. It is usually happened upon—unlike the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, and the World War II Memorial, which have become

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14 Ibid., 23.
16 Based on my personal schooling experiences and those of numerous colleagues I have questioned.
destination points. Instead, the memorial reflects the war’s obscurity and leaves visitors confused and emotionally indifferent.

In researching writings on the Korean War Veterans Memorial, two sources stood out as presenting strongly argued opinions on the purpose and success of the memorial. Barry Schwartz, a professor of sociology, has written extensively on collective memory and war commemoration. His 1997 essay “Commemoration and the Politics of Recognition: The Korean War Veterans Memorial,” written with Todd Bayma, argues that the memorial is successful for it reflects society’s transition to pluralism and inclusion as well as the return to memorialization of patriotism, duty, and dignity rather than suffering and victimization, as perceived in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. At the other end of the spectrum, Kristin Ann Hass, a professor of American culture studies, in her 2013 book *Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall*, claims the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is honest and avoids a nationalistic agenda, while the Korean War Veterans Memorial glorifies soldiers to conceal imperialistic undertones of the war in order to ensure future support for military action. I disagree with both. I do not believe the Korean War Veterans Memorial is successful in restoring nationalism and the nobility of the soldier and I take issue with Hass’s cynical critique of the memorial’s use of soldiers for political interests. As with any addition to the Mall, politics come into play because new memorials add to the construction of national history, but those political aims should not override the commemoration of soldiers. The memorial is neither successful nor disrespectful to the soldiers, but it lacks the ability to emotionally connect with and inform its audience.

Many debated variables determine the success or effectiveness of a war memorial. People may disagree on what the primary purpose of a memorial should be. Should it, foremost, please

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17 Interview with Park Ranger at Vietnam Veterans Memorial, August 8, 2013.
the veterans it intends to honor? Should it reinforce national beliefs or focus on educating its
diverse audiences? Schwartz and Bayma believe two aspects determine the way a war is
represented: Whether the war ended in victory or defeat and whether the war was necessary or
unnecessary.18 Each war memorial calls for a different aesthetic, design, and purpose. Since the
Korean War was never officially concluded, the memorial faced the challenge of
commemorating America’s first stalemate war. A triumphal space with traditional victorious
symbols would not be fitting, nor would a memorial of regret that addressed defeat. Not only was
the memorial caught between traditional and modernist styles, it had to deal with the ambiguity
of an unresolved war. The war’s lack of definition did not make the memorial’s development
easy; the Korean War Veterans Memorial committees needed to recognize these complexities to
ensure the memorial addressed them in a clear way. Instead, the design further complicated the
war’s memory in trying to convey multiple messages and satisfy too many interests and desires.

Initiations for war commemorations usually begin with an individual or organization who
builds a strong case addressing the need to commemorate a specific war or battle. Once the
project gains enough support and momentum, the plan is presented to Congress as a bill to be
passed. The Korean War Veterans Memorial went through a particularly drawn-out process. Two
years after the war, a letter was written to the Washington Post and Times Herald proposing a
Korean War Memorial: “Men of all races and creeds died for freedom there. . . . Would not that
[monument] serve to remind us and others that even the ‘little wars’ against free people (or even
against unfree people) are important today?”19 However, nothing came of the proposition, in
large part because people in the 1950s, still exhausted from World War II, did not wish to focus

18 Barry Schwartz and Todd Bayma, “Commemoration and the Politics of Recognition: The
19 G. Holcomb, letter to the editor, Washington Post and Times Herald, June 15, 1955, in Hass,
Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall, 30.
on remembering this war.20 Not until the 1980s when widespread interest in memorials increased did the Korean War Veterans Memorial begin to take shape. As mentioned, the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial raised many questions regarding why a Korean War memorial did not exist and motivated individuals to reignite the project.

In 1985 Stan Parris, a Korean War veteran and Virginia congressional representative, set forth a bill for a Korean War veterans memorial to be located in Washington, D.C.21 Parris told Congress: “A great disservice has been done to a very large segment of our population—a group of 5.7 million American citizens who served during the Korean War. 54,236 Americans made the ultimate sacrifice for their country and the ideals of freedom.”22 He believed the nation had ignored the war and those who served, and that the situation needed to be corrected. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan and the U.S. House of Representatives authorized one million dollars for the planning, design, and construction of the Korean War memorial.23

President Reagan appointed twelve Korean War veterans to the Korean War Veterans Memorial Advisory Board (KWVMAB) to select the winning design and present it to the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), and the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) for a final approval.24 Reagan did not chose members from the Korean War Veterans Association (KWVA), but from the highest ranking and most successful veterans, which included generals, colonels, and CEOs.25 Nevertheless, the design decision was now placed in the hands of veterans, unlike the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

20 Doss, Memorial Mania, 40.
21 Hass, Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall, 33.
24 Ibid., 36.
25 Ibid., 38.
selection panel, which only included artists and architects. This made a powerful statement about who had the right to determine the method and meaning of the war’s memorialization.26 However, in the end, the KWVMAB did not have as much influence or control over the memorial as assumed. Designs ultimately had to pass through government agencies, fueling a power struggle over the memorial’s style, message, and purpose during years of controversy, disagreements, and lawsuits.

Each committee involved in the Korean War Veterans Memorial held different responsibilities and acted as a check and balance system between veterans, the government, and the artists. The Commission of Fine Arts, led by “qualified judges of fine art,” is central in “giving expert advice to the President, Congress and the heads of departments and agencies of the Federal and District of Columbia governments on matters of design and aesthetics, as they affect the Federal interest and preserve the dignity of the nation’s capital.”27 After the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the CFA, essentially in charge of cultural and artistic affairs, has been interested in bringing a new modern aesthetic to the Mall. The National Capital Planning Commission, founded in 1926, oversees planning on the National Mall and is led by architects and designers with extensive cultural backgrounds and interests in Washington, D.C.’s development.28 In 1986, Congress passed the Commemorative Works Act in response to the commemoration frenzy and the call for more memorials on the National Mall. The Act established guidelines for proposed memorials and reinforced the government’s hand in National Mall additions. The Act specifies that “an event or individual cannot be memorialized prior to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the event or the death of the individual” and “military monuments

26 Schwartz and Bayma, “Commemoration and the Politics of Recognition,” 952.
and memorials may only commemorate a war or similar major military conflict or a branch of
the Armed forces.”29 With so many committees with varying interests involved, the creation of
the Korean War Veterans Memorial would be an intense and highly charged process.

In 1988 the Senate presented a legislative report on a Korean War memorial reiterating
the purpose and function of a memorial. It stated, “the Secretary of the Interior may approve the
location of a commemorative work in ‘Area I’ only if he finds that the subject of the work is
found to be of ‘preeminent historical and lasting significance to the Nation’.”30 The Act that was
approved authorized

the American Battle Monuments Commission to establish a memorial on Federal land in
the District of Columbia and its environs to honor members of the Armed Forces of the
United States who served in the Korean War, particularly those who were killed in action,
are still listed as missing in action, or were held as prisoners of war…. [T]his proposed
memorial represents the sacrifices and achievements of the American Forces in the
Korean War.31

Two key words in the Act, “sacrifice” and “achievement,” speak to the intended core values of
the memorial, which were further emphasized in the design competition guidelines. The
American Battle Monuments Commission and Korean War Veterans Memorial Advisory Board
presented detailed instructions for the competition, including a statement of purpose and design
requirements that purposely looked to counter the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.32 Veterans called
for a patriotic memorial that evoked “hope, honor, and service,” as well as “respect” and
“pride.”33 In addition to expressing the sacrifices of those who served, the memorial needed to
send an uplifting message of accomplishment, in an effort to restore the American values of

30 “Korean War Veterans Memorial,” 543th Cong., 2nd sess., 1F Senate Report 100-289, no. 100
(February 15, 1988), 3.
31 Ibid., 3.
pride and honorable service that many at the time thought the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
denied through its black surface and initial absence of figures. The statement of purpose clearly
outlines the goal of the memorial:

The memorial will express the enduring gratitude of the American people for all who
took part in that conflict under our flag. It will honor those who survived no less than
those who gave their lives, and will project in a most positive fashion, the spirit of
service, the willingness to sacrifice and the dedication to the cause of freedom that
characterized all participants.

The memorial would focus on gratitude over grief and, although not initially stated in the
purpose, include representations of soldiers from various backgrounds.

The design competition generated 534 entries; the winning proposal came from a group
of professional architects from Pennsylvania State University: Don Alvaro Leon, Veronica Burns
Lucas, John Paul Lucas, and Eliza Pennypacker Oberholtzer. Their concept emphasized the
soldiers’ experience and was based on extensive research from texts, photographs, and private
interviews with veterans. The design included an enclosed circular plaza with a central pole for
the American flag and a seven-foot tall wall that featured reliefs and inscriptions (Figure 8).
Throughout the memorial a red line would guide visitors first through a collective of thirty-eight
granite soldiers and downward into the plaza, signifying a transition from war to peace. The
directed movement in the memorial was meant to create a chronological narrative and reflective
journey. The number of soldiers derived from the thirty-eighth parallel, while the inspiration
for them being on foot came from a veteran who described to the architects his war experience:

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34 In 1984, a bronze sculpture titled *Three Fighting Men* was dedicated at the entrance of the
Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Sculpted by Frederick Hart, the addition depicts three seven-foot
tall servicemen.
35 “The Korean War Veterans Memorial National Design Competition,” November, 1988,
Commission of Fine Art files, CFA minutes, 26/JUL/89-1.
36 Hass, *Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall*, 41.
“We knew the war through our feet. . . . We walked every inch of that country.”\textsuperscript{37} Appearing to be mobilizing toward the American flag, the seven-foot statues would be combat-equipped and have water running around their feet that flowed into the plaza. According to John Paul Lucas of the design team, patriotism would be the memorial’s key theme told through the experience of war.\textsuperscript{38} The figures were meant to recreate a war experience that enabled visitors to place themselves in the battlefield. The soldiers would be “vague” and “utterly lacking detail” to be inclusive and stylistically intriguing.\textsuperscript{39} However, the ambiguity of their facial features was inconsistent with the rest of the specificity of the design and the directness of their route, revealing the beginning of the memorial’s conflicting directions. Since the architects lacked sculptural backgrounds, no sketches of the proposed soldiers were submitted in the winning plan, which left the figures’s representation open to debate.

Tensions escalated when the Korean War Veterans Memorial Advisory Board hired Copper-Lecky Inc., an architectural firm based in Washington, D.C., to execute the memorial. The KWVMAB chose Cooper-Lecky based on its previous experience in constructing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Cooper-Lecky boldly established its presence in the Korean War Veterans Memorial process by introducing a new militaristic design without consulting the Penn State team. Although the Penn State architects looked to capture the feelings and emotions of battle they did not envision a heroic military scene. The two competing designs and themes fueled a highly publicized lawsuit over rights to the design and the memorial’s message. The \textit{New York Times} reported that at the hearing Lucas stated, “Clearly you have two designs here. . .

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Schwartz and Bayma, “Commemoration and the Politics of Recognition,” 953.
\end{itemize}
Charles H. Atherton, secretary of the Commission of Fine Arts stated in 1990, “We generally do not look at two designs on one issue, but as a matter of fairness we felt we should do this.”

Atherton’s comment raises the issue of public art’s democratic process and how “fairness” makes it difficult to establish memorials with a comprehensible message that allows for artistic interpretation. In further discussing the hearing’s topic, Atherton told the New York Times,

“The winning design, in effect, becomes the property of the client.” In this case the client was the Korean Veterans Memorial Advisory Board, the Army Corps of Engineers and the American Battle Monument Commission. “They have the liberty to change whatever they feel is not suitable, and they have the legal right to do that.”

Since the original proposal legally became the client’s property, the Penn State design team essentially lost all control of its modifications and new direction, leaving them infuriated with the government’s manipulation of the project, as a “repugnant and duplicitous situation.” As legal battles and power struggles shifted focus away from the core values of the memorial and onto ownership rights, the “uplifting” and “honorable” endeavor of the Korean War Veterans Memorial became tainted with negativity. The heated issues raised by the process, made it difficult for the design to move forward in a productive and cohesive way. Tired of fighting and having lost their lawsuit in federal court, the Penn State design team dropped out of the project.

However, in 1991, just before the final design was to be approved, the project faced another round of disagreements and debate. The Commission of Fine Arts rejected the modifications and called for a redesign that would eliminate the traditional freestanding

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Schwartz and Bayma, “Commemoration and the Politics of Recognition,” 955.
sculptures to avoid a dramatic militaristic scene. The American Battle Monuments Commission was shocked by the Commission of Fine Arts’s abrupt decision and stated, through a lawyer, they would only compromise by reducing the number of statues to nineteen. This seemed to settle figure numbers, but disputes over how they would be depicted further stalled the project.

In another design competition held to resolve the rendering of the figures, three finalists, Frank C. Gaylord II, Rolf Kirken, and Lawrence Ludtke, presented their proposals to the commissions and boards. Without specific stylistic guidelines, competing approaches to the rendering of the figures resulted. The Korean War Memorial Advisory Board and the American Battle Monuments Commission favored traditional military detail and heroism, whereas the Commission of Fine Arts and National Capital Planning Commission wanted the memorial to be “inclusive” yet “non-representational.” General Stilwell, a veteran of the Korean War and chair of the KWMAB, believed the soldiers should be in battle “kneeling, some pulling pins out of grenades, some holding bazookas ready to fire.” Stilwell saw the thirty-eight oversized soldiers trudging as monotonous and a false reflection of the war. He wanted a grand figurative narrative to make an impression and set the memorial apart from other sites on the Mall. Other veterans expressed disapproval of the “ghostlike,” wandering figures. Wayne Ballew, who served in the Marines, said, "When people got killed they didn't get killed for policing. We got killed because it was a war." Veterans wanted the war to be remembered accurately, stating that

45 Ibid., 955.
46 Hass, Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall, 45.
48 Ibid.
“proper historical perspective” was necessary for visitors to grasp fully the war’s devastation.\textsuperscript{50} The final design’s soldiers, distant from each other, roaming with glazed and vague expressions, do not reflect a treacherous war, but patrol and “police action,” a term that veterans believe dishonors and belittles their sacrifices and efforts.\textsuperscript{51} However, depicting an aggressive scene could have introduced other issues, such as public censorship, the glorification of violence, and the sculpture’s dialogue with other memorials. Hass emphasized this last problem by stating that it would be impossible for the battle scene to contain its narrative at the Korean War Veterans Memorial site, since a soldier throwing a grenade or pointing a weapon, based on the direction it is aimed, can become a political statement and critique.\textsuperscript{52} An explosive or weapon seemingly directed towards Arlington National Cemetery, the Capitol Building, or any of the other monuments undoubtedly would provoke controversy. The Korean War Veterans Memorial’s committees needed to find a way to honor the veterans’s wishes, honestly present the war, and appropriately depict combat.

Furthermore, vague and “non-representational” figures would not satisfy the agencies’s interest in clearly suggesting inclusivity in terms of race, military branch, and support aid. As a result of the two ideas, a compromise was made and essentially the two styles were morphed together.\textsuperscript{53} In regard to the final decision William Lecky stated,

There’s no question that there was a healthy conflict between what the client wanted, which was something very realistic and militarily accurate, and what the reviewing commissions—the artistic side, if you will—preferred, which was something more abstract. The final solution was what we like to call “impressionistic styling,” which

\textsuperscript{50} Hagopian, “The Korean War Veterans Memorial and Problems of Representation,” 229.
\textsuperscript{51} Purdum, “War in Korea, Fast Receding, Gets Memorial.”
\textsuperscript{52} Hass, \textit{Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall}, 48-49.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 50.
makes it very clear what is being portrayed, but diminishes the sense of an actual collection of ground troops moving across the mall.\(^{54}\) During the finalists’ presentations, Gaylord’s three-dimensional studies stood out to the groups for capturing the “impressionistic style” they had compromised on, and he won the commission.\(^{55}\) Gaylord, a World War II veteran and academically trained sculptor, joined the project with strong opinions. His first criticism of the Penn State team’s conception concerned the impracticality of carving representations of soldiers in motion from granite and he suggested stainless steel as an alternative. Critical of the earlier team’s lack of sculptural knowledge and failure to consider the details of the design, Gaylord inserted his own composition and vision.\(^{56}\) Although a design had been approved, the committees of the Korean War Veterans Memorial continued to debate details.

In 1994, the Commission of Fine Arts, American Battle Monuments Commission, and Cooper-Lecky visited Gaylord’s studio where they critiqued his figures in progress. For instance, they deemed one statue’s “bridge of the nose too broad,” while in another the face looked too sweet and the lips and mouth needed adjustment.\(^{57}\) According to architect Kent Cooper, “It was agreed to modify the facial expression to be less soulful and ‘more intensely searching.’ ”\(^{58}\) Their comments infuriated Gaylord, who believed they had reached a mutual understanding of how the soldiers would be represented.\(^{59}\) In his interview with Hass ten years later, Gaylord still exhibited frustration towards the design process and maintained that his vision as a sculptor and war

\(^{55}\) Kent Cooper memo, “Some Thoughts from the Designers,” June 1, 1993, CFA files, CFA minutes 23/JUN/93-2.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 53, Hass interview with Gaylord April 10, 2007.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 53.
\(^{59}\) Ibid., 52.
veteran was not entirely manifested. Although the soldiers are Gaylord’s most esteemed and recognized work as an artist, the memorial continues to anger Gaylord and generate controversy.

Continuous miscommunication of visions and disagreements on details plagued the design process of the Korean War Veterans Memorial. The artists, government commissions, and veteran boards never saw eye-to-eye from the start. Instead of resolving stylistic and thematic issues, they forced them together, producing a confusing tableau consisting of multiple messages. Since the original design, the soldiers had transformed from men moving calmly and peacefully towards the flag, to figures reenacting a battle scene, to a subdued “impressionistic styling,” essentially, a combination of realistic and less defined features. The final consensus was to deemphasize the presence of weapons and realism, which resulted in a disconcerting representation of the soldiers. After years of conversations, modifications, and disagreements, the commission settled for a design, that I believe, satisfied “political correctness and aesthetic tastes.” The original winning design had morphed into an entirely different concept, with the column of soldier statues and the flagpole its only remaining features.

The Korean War Veterans Memorial design process brings into question the appropriate approach to building a memorial. Neil H. Porterfield, a landscape architect and vice chairman of

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60 Ibid., 54.
61 Eleven years following the dedication of the KWVM, Gaylord sued the United States Postal Service for selling a stamp that featured the column of soldiers covered in snow. The photograph was taken by an ex-Marine who received $1,500 for the image. Gaylord believed it was his right as the sculptor to receive compensation and royalties. In 2011, the lawsuit was settled and the U.S. Court of Federal Claims awarded Gaylord $685,000. Leigh Anne Miller, “USPS to Pay Korean War Memorial Sculptor $685,000,” Art in America (September 24, 2013), http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/usps-to-pay-korean-war-memorial-sculptor-685000/.
62 Hass, Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall, 50.
63 Schwartz and Bayma, “Commemoration and the Politics of Recognition,” 956.
the Commission of Fine Arts from 1985 to 1992, linked the lawsuits and pending design of the memorial back to its process: “the Washington design competition with its numerous government commissions and multiple official advisers is a horrible process for creating great designs.”\(^{64}\) In trying to accomplish many goals while addressing complex issues, the memorial lost cohesion and became a jumble of sculptural and architectural elements. It is evident the Korean War Veterans Memorial’s problems and disagreements consumed the project and, in an attempt to be “democratic,” “fair,” and “pluralistic” in the design process, these issues were resolved at the expense of the memorial’s artistic integrity and didactic intent. Having analyzed the historical context of commemoration on the National Mall and the design process of the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the following paragraphs examine the memorial’s three main features in their final form more closely.

The column of soldiers became the memorial’s symbol of inclusivity. The figures each represent branches of the military; fourteen Army, three Marines, one Navy, and one Air Force as well as the different ethnicities that made up the U.S. military (Figure 9). The Korean War was the first war to include servicemen of different ethnicities in the American military, an aspect of the war the commission boards were adamant about representing (Figure 10). The breakdown of ethnicity includes: twelve Caucasians, three African Americans, two Hispanics, one Native American, and one Asian American. The number of soldiers representing each ethnicity are unequal, another cause of significant controversy, but it was decided that the fairest way of assigning ethnicity to each statue would be based on the percentage of ethnic representation in the military, with Caucasians making up the majority. With large ponchos concealing their uniforms and helmets further obscuring the gestural modeling of their faces,

\(^{64}\) Gamarekian, “Architects Clash Over Korean War Memorial.”
these specific references that the soldiers represent are only evident if you happen to catch a Park Ranger’s talk at the site.\textsuperscript{65} Schwartz and Bayma maintain that the memorial surpasses other memorials because it includes equal acknowledgment. But Schwartz and Bayma refrain from discussion of style and aesthetics, which condition how visitors interpret the soldiers. Gaylord’s sculpting of specific ethnicities in each soldier is apparent in a few, but overall the concept lacks clarity, in large part because the design called for “impressionistic” styling of specific representations. The final contradictory decision behind the styling of the sculptures demonstrates how the agencies in the commission did not fully consider how style relates to their message. While the idea of inclusion is significant to the memorial, without an effective visual language to communicate it, the meaning of the figures remains inaccessible.

Schwartz and Bayma also claim that the soldiers restore dignity and duty to military service; however, their hunched over bodies and blank expressions as they creep forward are haunting and uneasy. Especially at nighttime, when spotlights produce an eerie scene, they appear to be lost, aimlessly wandering, further confusing the viewer about their purpose and the war in general (Figure 11). Their ghostlike presence is anything but nationalistic and politically glorified, which negates Hass’s argument that they are intended to draw support for current and future wars. Furthermore, Gaylord’s addition of ponchos, to appease the committees, hides their weapons and affects the soldier’s body language, making their stance seem uncomfortable and awkward, and certainly not confident, let alone heroic (Figure 12). Some look outward into the distance in exhaustion and confusion, while others gaze behind them or at their comrades.

The placement of the group of soldiers among the small shrubs through which they move tries to recreate the feeling of men in the field and an opportunity for the visitor to relate to their

\textsuperscript{65} Observation made during visit to the Korean War Veterans Memorial on August 8, 2013.
challenges. The idea is interesting, but not executed successfully. As mentioned, the visitor is blocked off from walking among the soldiers and truly experiencing the space. The soldiers are distant both emotionally and literally. Furthermore, their bewildered demeanor is difficult to decipher and situates the soldiers in an unusual and uneasy context that raises more questions about their efforts and what is being commemorated.

Compared to soldiers represented in other memorials in Washington, D.C., the Korean War Veterans Memorial displays a drastic change in composition and style. For instance, the US Marine Corps War Memorial, sculpted by Felix de Weldon in 1954, portrays a group of Marines raising a flagpole on Iwo Jima in the Pacific during a World War II battle (Figure 13). Located on the axis of the Mall across the Potomac River in Arlington Cemetery, the sculpture imitates a well-known World War II photograph by Joe Rosenthal taken in Japan. The figures strain together as a unified, pyramidal group, with their bodies displaying strength and determination. With its emphasis on figural unity, the memorial achieves a sense of heroic realism, military drama, and emotion. Instead of haunting the space, like the Korean War soldiers, the figures of the US Marine Corps War Memorial make their presence honorable, evoking an impression of dignity and empowerment rather than emptiness. The memorial’s harmonized figures and strong emotional message resonate with the public and has become a signature image and symbol of the military.

At the opposite end of the Mall axis in front of the Capitol building, the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial depicts a similar type of heroic unity in a sculpture of multiple combat groups (Figure 14). Sculpted by Henry Shrady between 1902 and 1924, the bronze figures express a range of emotions as they dynamically struggle forward in the bitter cold. The militaristic battle scene, slightly raised on a plinth, provides viewers with multiple vantage points, placing them in the...
action of war. For instance, when approaching the sculpture from the west, the visitor encounters a fallen horse, trapping a soldier who desperately reaches out and attempts to move. Gazing upward, special gaps in the composition allow the viewer to observe the other soldiers’ reactions. The sculpture’s intriguing and challenging layout entices the viewer, making a strong impression and presence. Memorial scholar Kirk Savage states, “Every figure in the two groups is absorbed single-mindedly in his own danger or duress or duty; their absorption, in turn, draws us into their world and makes our encounter with them strangely intimate despite the extremity of their situation.”

The intimacy Savage describes is characteristically lacking in the Korean War Veterans Memorial. Spatially and stylistically, the soldiers are distanced and disconnected from each other and the viewer. Their blank, glazed facial expressions do not intrigue, but prevent the viewer’s engagement with the site. Since the veterans wanted a more realistic military scene, the commission might have integrated similar elements, such as unified soldiers in action, not necessarily the combative violence seen in the Grant Memorial, but a moment of strength and collective effort as displayed in the US Marine Corps War Memorial. This type of approach would have appealed to the veterans, intrigued visitors, and left an impression of purpose and dignity, rather than divided, distant soldiers.

Gaylord’s rendering of the figures with loosely modeled features and rough, textured imprints recalls Auguste Rodin’s approach to sculpture in the late nineteenth-century. Rodin’s public monument the *Burghers of Calais* 1884-95, (Figure 15), in particular, provides an intriguing comparison to the column at the Korean War Veterans Memorial. The *Burghers of Calais* depicts a group of six figures detached from one another, but tightly spaced. Similar to the

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Korean War soldiers, the figures stand on the same level and are distinguished by different emotions, objects, and poses.\(^{67}\) Although individualized, Rodin maintains a sense of unity between figures by intermixing stances and dynamically arranging their bodies. Rodin’s deviation from public art’s conventions of hierarchal “pyramid” compositions and realistic representation initially engendered great controversy.\(^{68}\) Yet his unorthodox handling of historical subject matter and monumental sculpture displays what would have been an effective solution to balance the veterans desire for figural drama and camaraderie, and the Commission of Fine Art’s want for “impressionistic” features. Perhaps if the soldiers were grouped in a similar manner, their reception would be more impactful and reflective of the collective efforts in Korea. The *Burghers of Calais* and the column both signify points of stylistic tension and transition in public memorials for historical events, with one, the *Burghers of Calais* conveying a clearer narrative.

After walking alongside the sculptures, the visitor is directed towards the flagpole and the “Pool of Remembrance.” Water quietly fills the 128-foot circle from the bottom and runs off the sides. The “Pool of Remembrance” represents the memorial’s most modernist feature in terms of its reductive geometric form and reflective surface. In a semi-circle enclosing the pool area, the twenty-eight trees shade benches for visitors to rest, observe, and contemplate the meaning of sacrifice. However, the National Park Service has indicated that the pool has been “misunderstood” and turned into a wishing well.\(^{69}\) On its own, the pool has potential to inspire aesthetic interpretation and offer a quiet space of healing, but its inclusion with the other parts weakens its presence and purpose. Surrounding the pool, numbers addressing the deaths and

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\(^{67}\) The soldier statues at the Korean War Veterans Memorial are on a gradual incline leading up to the flagpole, raising some figures slightly above others. However, they are always equal to the ground of the visitors.


\(^{69}\) Savage, *Monument Wars*, 282.
fatalities recorded by the United States and United Nations are inscribed. They are organized into four categories: “Killed in Action,” “Missing in Action,” “Prisoners of War” and “Wounded in Action” (Figure 15). Behind the pool is the black granite wall displaying the statement “Freedom is Not Free” (Figure 16).

This succinct yet loaded phrase elicits various interpretations. Hass, for instance, reads the inscription as a means to avoid dealing with the complicated issues of the war’s purpose and outcome, a simplified reminder that America protects freedom in the world. On the other hand, scholar Steven Johnson views it as a counter to sentiments associated with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: “It’s as if the Korean War Memorial were chastising the pilgrims of the Wall. Freedom is not free, it must be remembered. That’s just the way the world works. There’s nothing to cry about here, in public, on the national Mall.” Johnson highlights the memorial’s absence of emotional connection and understanding, which has played a significant part in the memorial’s lack of attention, recognition, and resonance with the public. The phrase is direct, yet vague. It minimalizes the Korean War to a single sentence. Although it addresses one of the memorial’s focuses—sacrifice—it appears abruptly and does nothing to counteract the oblique, wandering soldiers. Words with such conviction should be paired with order and a coherent visual language and style.

Other written features of the memorial include a triangular dedication stone that reads “Our Nation Honors Her Uniformed Sons and Daughters Who Answered Their Country’s Call to Defend a Country They Did Not Know and a People They Had Never Met” (Figure 17). The strange statement lacks sophistication or profound meaning. What were they defending? Who are

the people they never met? Once again the language is vague, uninformative, and ineffective. It lacks specific information for visitors and appears to be a weak attempt to ensure everyone, including women, receive recognition. Additionally, the impact of this main textual statement of the memorial is lessened by its placement on the ground in silver letters, which makes it easy to miss.

Running along the north side of the memorial, inscriptions on a raised curb alphabetically list the twenty-two nations who fought alongside the United States. The inscriptions are instructive, but also easily overlooked. The list of allies represents another example of the memorial’s attempt at inclusivity. However, its ground location does not correlate with the list’s meaning, and only provides random information that clutters the memorial. Its poor location suggests it satisfies demands to include allied forces and fill open spaces, rather than being unified with the overall design.

Further crowding the memorial is the mural wall situated to the right of the column (Figure 18). Made of black granite, it displays the photographic engravings of 2,400 soldiers and military aides. Muralist Louis Nelson determined the layout of the images and oversaw its execution. He refers to the work as “the nation’s mantelpiece” because it aims to call forth families’ home displays of photographs of their sons and daughters away at war. Each image is derived from photographs in the National Archives and shows individuals performing different tasks. They are collaged together in a way that suggests a mountain in the Korean terrain. However, the large empty spaces below and above the collage give a sense of void or incompleteness, as if there should be more images or texts. A narrative would appear to be

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72 Highsmith and Landphair, Forgotten No More, 62.
73 Hass, Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall, 25.
intended, but the ambiguous grouping of the figures makes it difficult to draw profound meaning from the wall. Photoengraved in very low relief, images fade in and out, depending on the time of day. Reflections from the soldier statues nearby further obstruct the images visibility. When the soldiers are reflected on the granite, the thirty-eight statues that appear at the memorial are meant to symbolize the thirty-eighth parallel and the thirty-eight months at war. This is another detail of the memorial that is largely unrecognized.

The mural wall also exhibits modernist aesthetics through its simplified form and black, reflective surface. These specific aspects of the mural wall draw attention to the visitor’s presence in the space and attempt to generate “audience engagement” and a “felt experience.” Two key aspects of a memorial that, according to Doss, enhance memory. However, as in the “Pool of Remembrance,” these modernist elements lose their ability to activate a thought provoking space, because of the many competing features at the site that interfere with one another.

J. Carter Brown, director of the Commission of Fine Arts during the Korean War Veterans Memorial development, expressed doubt about the mural wall: “We had reservations it would be overloading things to have so much going on.” As the final element to be decided on in the design room, a majority felt it would detract from the memorial. Cooper stated, “They are saying we don't think it is successful because it is overwhelming.” Similar to the soldier statues, uncertainty surrounded the mural wall, but it was eventually decided that the visual relationship between the sculptures and mural was “complementary.” Whether the Commission of Fine Arts

74 Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 127.
76 Ibid.
passed the mural design because it grew tired of conflict or hoped it would resolve itself is unknown, but it ultimately represents concession contributing to the memorial’s lack of success.

As is evident, the Korean War Veterans Memorial employs multiple components in an effort to address many aspects of the war, but it lacks harmony and cohesion. The mural wall and soldier statues attempt to conflate conflicting styles in memorialization: representational and non-representational forms and figures. A memorial based on pastiche is not fitting for war commemoration, especially for such a little known and obscure war. From the beginning, the Commission of Fine Arts expressed concern over the memorial’s multiple elements. Member George Hartman stressed this concern to the *New York Times*, “I think the underlying problem of this design, is it is trying to do too much without a hierarchy of importance.”\(^77\) Although members recognized this issue emerging in the design period, any efforts to resolve the problem failed. Harmony, cohesion, and order should be set aside for visual commemorations of history, to allow the visitor to focus on reflecting, honoring and giving gratitude, instead of feeling confused and overwhelmed.

Not only does the Korean War Veterans Memorial not engage or resonate with the public, the veterans, the very individuals the memorial honors, are not satisfied with the design. Following, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial dedication ceremony a questionnaire was distributed to six-thousand veterans asking for opinions on the creation of a Korean War memorial. The questionnaire included these options: “(1) Above ground, visible, or below ground; (2) modern art or traditional art (3) decisions by veterans or decisions by architects.”\(^78\) After 350 questionnaires were returned the majority vote favored: above ground, traditional, and dictated

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by veterans. Based on this original questionnaire, the final design for the Korean Veterans
Memorial only satisfied one desire, above ground.

Veterans who have visited the memorial describe it as “haunting” and “ghostly almost.”\textsuperscript{79} When two sons of a veteran visited the site to honor their father’s recent passing, they were
disappointed and distraught over the design. One stated, “I don't have a sense of a cohesive
whole with a strategy, a mission. Can I find my father here? I don't think so.”\textsuperscript{80} They also shared
their expectations of being “stirred by the memorial” and ultimately feeling nothing. Such
reactions to the memorial do not contribute to the healing process or an atmosphere of gratitude
and honor.

Veterans have even voiced their discontent with the memorial to the House of
Representatives. In March of 2014, Retired Army Col. Bill Weber, who heads the Korean War
Veterans Association's Chapter 142, rallied fellow veterans to support a House bill that proposes
the addition of a “Wall of Remembrance” at the Korean War Veterans Memorial.\textsuperscript{81} Similar to the
Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the wall would list the names of the fallen. Veterans feel the
current memorial overlooks those left behind and the “Wall of Remembrance” would provide
closure for veterans and families.\textsuperscript{82} Weber, also a member of the Korean War Veterans Memorial
Advisory Board, stated during the design process the veterans’s board had pushed for the wall to be included, but their proposal was rejected. The bill has yet to be passed through, but the
veterans are hopeful local representatives will back their request.

\textsuperscript{79} Ted Landhphair, \textit{Remembering the Korean War},
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
Throughout the process it is clear veteran interests were not a priority and were manipulated in various ways. In the end, the veterans and public are left with an oblique, chaotic, and unimpressive memorial. I believe that war memorial commissions should honor veterans’ wishes as best they can since the space is foremost for them. But they also must be able to balance veteran opinions with artistic sensibility.

Following the completion of the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the World War II Memorial commission looked to return heroic nationalism to the Mall in a grandiose fashion. Dedicated in 2004, the memorial embodies classical revivalism with its triumphant pillars displaying wreaths, an enormous roaring fountain, and multiple narrative figurative reliefs (Figure 19). The World War II memorial looked to restore American nationalism and patriotism by depicting America’s “greatest generation” as the saviors and preservers of freedom. It also attempts to be instructive by including many informative quotations and symbols. However, many argued during the design process and after that its imposing character glorifies war and speaks to imperialism and masculinity, and although it has many significant details to help tell the war’s story, few people have the classical knowledge to decipher the symbols and draw profound meaning from the design. Nevertheless, I find it more successful because it conveys its meaning more directly and unifies its many traditional formal elements into a cohesive and commanding presence.

Any memorial dedicated on the Mall will generate praise and support, as well as controversy and disapproval. Such dialogues reveal democracy at work, civic engagement, and an evolving culture. The Korean War Veterans Memorial demonstrates the struggle to combine traditional and modernist aesthetics in war commemoration and shows how each style evokes

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83 Doss, Memorial Mania, 206.
84 Ibid., 198.
varying messages and psychological spaces that influence collective memory and identity differently. The intentions behind the Korean War Veterans Memorial were honorable and a necessary contribution to national collective memory, but it could have better served its purpose by focusing more on a harmony of parts, a clarity of message, and an enhanced level of emotional engagement in order to make a forgotten war and its veterans, “unforgettable.”
Figure 1
Map of National Mall, Washington, D.C.

Figure 2
Aerial view, Korean War Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1995
Figure 3
Korean War Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1995

Figure 4
Pool of Remembrance, Korean War Veterans Memorial, 1995
Figure 5
Louis Nelson, Korean War Veterans Memorial, Mural Wall

Figure 6
Henry Bacon (architect), Daniel Chester French (sculptor), The Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1922
Figure 7
Maya Lin, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1982

Figure 8
Figure 9
Frank Gaylord, Soldier Statues, Korean War Veterans Memorial

Figure 10
Frank Gaylord, detail Soldier Statues, Korean War Veterans Memorial
Figure 11
Frank Gaylord, Soldier Statues, Korean War Veterans Memorial

Figure 12
Frank Gaylord, Soldier Statues, Korean War Veterans Memorial
Figure 13  

Figure 14  
Henry Shrady, Grant Memorial Cavalry Group, viewed from the South, Washington, D.C., 1902-1924
Figure 15
Auguste Rodin, *Burghers of Calais*, 1884-95

Figure 16
Detail Pool of Remembrance, Korean War Veterans Memorial, 1995
Figure 17
Detail Pool of Remembrance, Korean War Veterans Memorial, 1995

Figure 18
Dedication stone, Korean War Veterans Memorial, 1995
Figure 19
Louis Nelson, Korean War Veterans Memorial, detail Mural Wall

Figure 20
Korean War Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1995
Figure 21
Friedrich St. Florian, National World War II Memorial, Washington, D.C., 2004
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Abstract

The design process and completed memorial for the Korean War raise many questions and issues regarding the nature of public commissions and how to visually commemorate a war. Since the Korean War—often called the “Forgotten War”—is a war of which few people have general knowledge, it was imperative for the memorial to educate visitors on the war’s purpose, outcome, and historical significance in order for the soldier’s efforts and sacrifices to be recognized and valued. It was also necessary for the memorial to express gratitude by respecting the veterans’s wishes for their site of remembrance. However, the national Korean War Veterans Memorial of 1995 in Washington, D.C., presents a poor design that does not succeed in representing or communicating either of the essential elements mentioned above. In examining the development and visual language of the Korean War Veterans Memorial, in context of America’s monument and memorial tradition, I argue that the failure of the memorial to fulfill its purpose is a result of the democratic nature of its design process and the excessive compromises that were made to resolve conflicting traditional ideals and modernist aesthetics in national commemoration.