

# WAR ON | THE | ROCKS

## Remembrance of war as a warning

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Two articles in different weekend magazines have me thinking about America's many wars. David Montgomery in last weekend's *Washington Post* pondered the proliferation of war memorials in our nation's capital. The second, an excerpt from C.J. Chivers's new book in the latest *New York Times* magazine, details the experiences of an Army unit in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley.

Some of those killed in that desolate distant place will be remembered, indirectly at least, in a new Global War on Terrorism Memorial. Montgomery reports that President Donald Trump "signed legislation waiving the statutory 10-year post-war waiting period so planning could begin." He continues:

That memorial would accomplish a feat rarely if ever matched in the annals of memorial building: commemorating a war before it is over. It also epitomizes the new state of affairs, where endless war means endless war-memorial building.

In a similar context, Chivers notes that the Afghan war will enter its 18th year in October. As he explains, this means that soldiers born after the U.S. military toppled the Taliban in 2001, who were not even crying babes when the planes hit the towers, will likely be serving there soon. And this is only one of several initiated after 9/11. Chivers recites the grim statistics that, for many Americans, have become akin to the music played in retail stores: We're vaguely aware that a song might be playing, but unable to hum the tune, let alone recite the lyrics:

More than three million Americans have served in uniform in these wars. Nearly 7,000 of them have died. Tens of thousands more have been wounded. More are killed or wounded each year, in smaller numbers but often in dreary circumstances...

Beyond the statistics, beyond the numbers killed and wounded, Americans are similarly disinclined to weigh their deeper meanings. Chivers spells those out, too.

On one matter there can be no argument: The policies that sent these men and women abroad, with their emphasis on military action and their visions of reordering nations and cultures, have not succeeded. It is beyond honest dispute that the wars did not achieve what their organizers promised... [They] have continued in varied forms and under different rationales... They

continue today without an end in sight, reauthorized in Pentagon budgets almost as if distant war is a presumed government action.

I wonder: Might our war memorials do more than memorialize war? Might they also help us to avoid future ones?

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It's not the first time that I contemplated this question.

Back in May 2004, I ventured down to the National Mall and wondered "What kind of memorial will they build for the Iraq war?" This was not long after the dedication of the new World War II memorial, and more than 22 years after one for Vietnam veterans was completed.

The contrasts between the two, with the Korean War memorial wedged both physically and stylistically in between, were obvious. Now 14 years later, Montgomery explained, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial remains among the most visited sites in the city (only the Lincoln Memorial draws more).

I recall the controversies surrounding the Vietnam memorial when it was commissioned and dedicated in the early 1980s. I was then in junior high school and had no personal memories of the period when the war, and the protests against it, raged. I asked one of the few men that I knew who had served in Vietnam, my eighth-grade history teacher, how he felt about the wall. I sensed a certain ambivalence in his response. He thought it appropriate, but there was no great enthusiasm for it. He was the kind of person, I think, who would have preferred a soaring testament to victory over evil. But, knowing the reality in Vietnam was a lot more complicated than that, he seemed content with (or perhaps resigned to) the compromise.

We don't yet know what the Global War on Terrorism Memorial will look like. The satirical Duffleblog suggests an "Eternal Flaming Wheelbarrow Full of Cash." But while Trump ensured that the war will have a memorial, he has also ensured the monument will memorialize the sacrifice of future soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, not merely those who have already served. The president hasn't seen to ending the wars he inherited. In many respects, he has expanded them. And there is no end in sight.

On the campaign trail, Donald Trump railed against Bush and Obama's wars. He elicited gasps from a partisan crowd in South Carolina when he accused George W. Bush of lying about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, then shocked the GOP establishment by winning the primary there.

Then, in the general election against another key Iraq war booster, Trump defied the conventional wisdom again. Research shows that he fared well in those communities that paid the heaviest price during America's post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq — so well, conclude study authors Douglas Kriner and Francis Shen, that these communities "may have been critically important to his narrow election victory" over Hillary Clinton.

Trump could reasonably have claimed that he had an electoral mandate to wind down the Global War on Terrorism, with its many theaters. But he did the opposite. Given the context of his

campaign message, that he sustains the military campaign in Afghanistan and expands U.S. involvement and support to conflicts elsewhere, confounds some.

But there is nothing confounding about it to me. The impulse driving the Trump administration to double down on foolish and unnecessary conflicts speaks to the key themes of Montgomery's article on war memorials: The United States is in the business of war. It's what we do. In the eyes of many Americans, war has become what makes America great.

So said former marine Scott Stump, the president of the National Desert Storm War Memorial Association. Stump campaigned tirelessly for a memorial on behalf of the over 700,000 Americans who served in the wars that reversed Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1991.

This means he claims to speak for me. I'm a veteran of that war. As a junior officer onboard USS Ticonderoga, a guided missile cruiser, at the tail end of a scheduled six-month Mediterranean deployment, I witnessed first-hand the earliest phase of America's intervention from the middle of the Red Sea. Less than a year later, the ship we affectionately called Tico returned to the region, this time all the way from Norfolk. By then the shooting had stopped.

Skeptics dismissed the short campaign, fought from mid-January to the end of February 1991, as a "video-game war," over almost before it began. Stump disagreed. The war "was a really big deal... It validated that America was back in business."

Such sentiment worried the University of Virginia's Elizabeth K. Meyer, a professor of landscape architecture, and the lone dissenter on the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, the body entrusted with the task of deciding what does or does not get built in the nation's capital. When the commission heard testimony from Stump and others, Meyer pushed back. "The mall is a public space that symbolizes our collective national identity, and we're more than wars."

Her objection was noted — and ignored. The National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial will be constructed on the southwest corner of Constitution Avenue and 23rd Street NW, not far from the Vietnam and Lincoln Memorials. It is expected to be ready for visitors in 2021.

It wasn't always this way.

Montgomery notes that "for nearly 200 years after Washington became the nation's capital — and after nine wars, plus the Indian wars — the Mall contained no major war memorials." After watching the debate over the Desert Storm memorial and the many of other monuments planned, including one for World War I, and for Native American veterans, and African Americans who served in the Revolutionary War, he wondered, "as the balance shifts ever more toward war, aren't we fundamentally changing our account of what makes America great? What, ultimately, is war's proper place in the national narrative?"

Later in the article he observes that "we have reached the point where *not* erecting a national tribute to those who served in a given war now speaks as loudly as building one. A failure to honor that memory in the heart of the nation's capital can increasingly be interpreted as a lack of respect."

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Montgomery is hardly the first to comment on Americans' shifting attitudes toward war. Andrew Bacevich's *The New American Militarism*, first published in 2005, has the most to teach us today about this problem. It is one of my favorite books — and, judging from the fact that it is now in its second edition, it has obviously struck a nerve with many other readers.

My former Cato colleague Justin Logan, writing in The American Conservative in 2010, also took note of the remarkable change in tone and sentiment toward the American military, and the wars that it fights:

The American Founders detested the signs of a bloated state: standing armies, a large fiscal-military federation, and a capacious national bureaucracy. It may be going too far to say that today's conservatives would denounce the Founding Fathers as unpatriotic conservatives — but not much too far. While members of the Right now flutter like schoolgirls at the mention of military leaders like Gen. David Petraeus, the Founders scorned the prospect of military leaders becoming figures of worshipful esteem...

In his farewell address to the nation, George Washington advised his countrymen to “avoid the necessity of those overgrown military establishments which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty.”

“The vast majority of America's landowning aristocracy,” writes Bruce Porter in War and the Rise of the State, “had an almost congenital distrust of standing armies, which their ancestors for generations had identified with despotism.”

Physician Benjamin Rush, a civic leader in Philadelphia and signer of the Declaration of Independence, suggested a series of slogans to be “placed over the door of the War Office,” including “An office for butchering the human species” and “A Widow and Orphan making office.”

After the American Civil War, attention shifted toward remembering those who fought in that conflict. But this, too, engendered vehement opposition. For example, Montgomery quotes William Dean Howells, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1866, and decrying the national urge to raise “a much greater standing army in bronze and marble than would have been needed for the suppression of any future rebellion.” Howells worried that a proliferation of war memorials would “misrepresent us and our age to posterity; for we are not a military people, (though we certainly know how to fight upon occasion).”

But the character of the American people seems to have changed since then. Judging from the war memorials now adorning the National Mall, and those planned, we *are* a military people, and our constant wars are disrupted only by brief occasions of peace.

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What is the solution? How can we redirect the nation's energy away from distant wars that years from now will require memorials to honor those killed in them?

Some argued that conscripting all 18-year old men, and now women, into the military, or at least subjecting some portion of that age cohort to the prospect of involuntary service, as was done during Korea and Vietnam, would force the public to confront the costs of the nation's wars. It might even, we are told, cause us to fight fewer of them, or fight them for a shorter period of time.

But I think that the memorials already built, and those under consideration, tell a different story. It is certainly true that the public today is generally unaware of the sacrifices that a small fraction of the population endures in war. The mere possibility that one's son or daughter, or brother or sister, or even their next-door neighbor, might come home in a flag-draped coffin could arouse Americans to care more. But is that what has happened?

The draft enabled U.S. leaders to imagine eventually deploying a force of more than 536,000 men to distant Southeast Asia. And casualties on the order of several hundred killed in a single month were not uncommon. In 1968, the war's deadliest year for U.S. troops, 16,899 Americans were killed. The knowledge that a ready supply of fresh recruits, many drawn against their will from the American hinterland, would replenish those lost in combat allowed for a certain complacency. Despite the shock of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, and the groundswell of opposition that arose after, U.S. forces remained in Vietnam long after, though in smaller numbers. The drawdown was hardly precipitous. Americans were still dying in Southeast Asia as late as 1975. For many Americans, and especially for U.S. leaders, such losses were unfortunate, but tolerable.

That is no longer the case. Though a comparably sized force was sent to Saudi Arabia in the prelude to the First Gulf War, most of those troops were there for only a few months. The prospect that a mere few thousand casualties might elicit an overwhelming flood of opposition helped to ensure that the war's losses would be contained. As it happened, the war claimed 383 American lives (148 of those in combat). The Gulf War force, comprised entirely of volunteers, did not resemble the armies who fought in the world wars, Korea, and Vietnam, which were made up of both volunteers and conscripts. Many young men enlisted with the knowledge that they were likely to be drafted if they did not volunteer. In other words, in a critical respect, the draft made it possible for over 58,000 names to be inscribed on that black granite wall. More than 36,000 Americans died in Korea over a much shorter period of time. The prospect that the Global War on Terrorism will eventually consume nearly as many American lives – even if it lasts for decades — seems impossible to contemplate. The total from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan currently stands at 6,954, according to icasualties. We have the volunteer army partly to thank for that.

Ultimately, those who send the nation to war must be held accountable for their decisions. I would like to see members of Congress take their oath to uphold the Constitution seriously, but that seems to be going nowhere. A new approach to our war memorials might be more effective.

In 2009, as Viper Company battled Taliban insurgents in the Korengal Valley, higher-ups were contemplating whether U.S. troops should be there at all. Within a year, they had evacuated the Korengal Outpost. Robert Soto, the Army specialist featured in Chivers' story, heard the news

while in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where he was issuing food to earthquake survivors. “On one level he understood,” Chivers writes, “On another he was crushed. *Why did it take years to acknowledge mistakes?* he wondered. *All of a sudden, now, you’re realizing that maybe this isn’t working?*”

Years later, when Soto allowed himself to consider the deeper meaning of his time in Afghanistan, Chivers explains:

He tread as if a balance might exist between respecting the sacrifice and pain of others and speaking forthrightly about the fatal misjudgments of those who managed America’s wars. “I try to be respectful; I don’t want to say that people died for nothing,” he said. “I could never make the families who lost someone think their loved one died in vain.”

Still he wondered: Was there no accountability for the senior... officers whose plans and orders had either fizzled or failed to create lasting success, and yet who kept rising. Soto watched some of them as they were revered and celebrated in Washington and by members of the press, even after past plans were discredited and enemies retrenched.

Near the end of the fifth episode in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s “The Vietnam War” series, we learn that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had grave concerns about the U.S. war in Vietnam by late 1967. In a secret memo to President Lyndon Johnson, he urged a halt to bombing, a freeze on American troop levels, and renewed negotiations. There is no “reason to believe,” McNamara wrote, “that the steady progress we are likely to make, the continued infliction of grievous casualties, or the heavy punishment of air bombardment will suffice to break the will of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to continue to fight.” Separately he stated his “belief that continuation of our present action in Southeast Asia would be dangerous, costly in lives, and unsatisfactory to the American people.”

Had the troop levels come down then, there would be far fewer names carved in black granite in that wall on the National Mall. Instead, McNamara kept his doubts concealed from public view. LBJ secured him a comfortable job as president of the World Bank. And the casualty rolls from Vietnam only grew longer. The names can now be found on Panels 33E through W1 on the wall.

Perhaps our memorials should honor those killed in distant lands, but also recall the policies and people that put them in those places? Perhaps we should acknowledge those who had the courage, or the wisdom, to end the wars once it was obvious that the costs outweighed the benefits? I’d support some sort of formal recognition for those who eventually pulled U.S. troops out of Korengal. Maybe a plaque somewhere?

Meanwhile, perhaps those still living, who were responsible for the names carved in smooth stone, should be tasked with tending these memorials, much as common criminals are put to work picking up trash along the highways.

Better yet, perhaps we should recognize those who keep the country out of unnecessary wars altogether. Alas, they left no memorials to tend.

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