



Vietnam War Memorial Wall Speech

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Thank you ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, fellow veterans, and especially fellow veterans of the war in Vietnam. It is indeed a tremendous honor for me to stand before you this morning as we come together to remember fallen comrades and a very important time in our lives. A time of war, a time of conflict not only in Southeast Asia, but throughout our nation. Indeed a time that has in many ways shaped our national consciousness, and for we veterans, a time which forged a sense of self that in many ways defines us still today. Lest we forget...how then do we remember? How do we bring closure within ourselves, how do we honor those who did not come home, or came home broken and bent in both body and spirit? I remember when the architectural design of the Vietnam Memorial...the Wall...was first proposed. Many of us recoiled at the thought of a ditch on the Mall listing nothing more than the names of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. No towering statues or obelisks to mark this sacred site or recognize the grandeur of so many sacrifices. Surely, this was yet one more insult hurled at those who had answered the call to serve their nation rather than serve themselves. But, that wall has transcended all things political and overcome controversy as it reaches out to us who served, and even those who did not serve, while deeply touching all us who lost friends, neighbors, and loved ones during that troubled time. The mystery of the wall is found in its majestic simplicity. Panels of black stone that hold not only the names of those killed, but in its mirror-like finish, the faces of all us who come to witness its solemn statement. In that reflection, we are made one with the monument, we join its essence, and are consumed by images behind the names. Images of young men, their lives cut short, their personal sacrifices often unrecorded, their selfless service, unflinching courage, and the unique love and caring that is shared by comrades in arms. It is the wound on our National Mall that never heals, but it does serve to soothe the deep scars on those of us who carry heavy memories, and for some perhaps a little guilt for having been the ones fortunate enough to return to "the world". As this Memorial travels around the country it invariably brings with it a lot of discussion and perhaps even rekindles old arguments about the Vietnam War.

The arrival of the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Huntsville provides an opportunity for us to reflect on this important period in our individual lives and our nation's history. Of course, there are those who might say we veterans are still too close to the heat of battle, too burdened by personal experiences to make objective judgements about the Vietnam War. To that I say, BULL! I've grown weary of those in the media, academia, and the entertainment industry who would purport to speak for us, or to try to define us a bunch of hair-trigger psychopaths on the verge of insanity or some unspeakable violence. We who were actually there know what we saw, and we know what we did. Each of us are just one of the millions who proudly served; having done our duty with honor. I see little of what I experienced reflected in Oliver Stone's movies. I personally think Oliver donated a few too many of his brain cells to his drug use. In my view, movies like *Apocalypse Now* are nothing more than a collection of psychotic experiences made up in Hollywood bearing scant resemblance to the reality we experienced. You and I can certainly recognize the difference between artistic license and a lie, can't we!

America's involvement in Vietnam lasted for thirteen years; from 1960 to 1973. Of course the result was not victory at all. Not even a cease-fire or a demilitarized strip of land between North and South as happened in Korea. Just negotiated terms allowing the United States of America to "withdraw with honor". Whatever that meant. So, we didn't return home to victory parades and kisses in Times Square. Most of us were just another passenger aboard a chartered airliner (mine was a Braniff Airlines Boeing 707 painted a heinous green color...what a beautiful sight!). Others came home in Air Force cargo planes to be dumped unceremoniously at some military base usually in the middle of the night. Remember we came home to antipathy and in many cases to antagonism. We were told to quickly get out of our uniforms in order to avoid confrontations on city streets. No wonder it has taken so long for many of us to even want to talk about the war. But talk we must for we are living witnesses, and if we are silent others will continue to spin a version of the truth that best suits their personal or political agenda. We must dispel the myths that have grown up about the War, and there are so many. Those of us who served must debunk these myths at every opportunity, and today is one of those.

The first myth is that the armed forces of the United States suffered a major military defeat in Vietnam. Our forces were never defeated in combat, but we were defeated on the political battlefield. There were terrible battles where our soldiers and marines suffered awful casualties like Dak TO and Hamburger Hill, and our airmen suffered too many killed and captured in the air campaign, but the war was not lost as a result of these battles. In fact, where we found the enemy we defeated him. After the Tet Offensive in 1968, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese operating in the south were so soundly defeated that they could not launch another major offensive until 1972. That didn't deter the North Vietnamese since they were willing to lose the war on the battlefield, they were after victory in the minds of the American people. Perhaps we could have won a military victory, but it would have taken many more than the 500,000 troops we had in Vietnam at the height of the war. Besides by 1969, public opinion in the United States wanted us out of Vietnam. The role of the media in deciding this issue has been the subject of many books and articles, so I won't go into that here. I will say I don't believe the media caused us to lose the war, although some in the press were trying their best to make it so. Those of you who attended the AUSA Conference in DC this year will recall General Weyand's remarks while accepting the George C. Marshall Award. He was interviewed by Walter Cronkite in the Mekong Delta following the resounding defeat of enemy forces there by the US Military, including U.S. Navy Riverine Forces. Walter acknowledged the victory, but told General Weyand he preferred to report on the thousands of Vietnamese he had seen being put in mass graves in Hue after Tet. In reporting this rather than any American victory, he said he hoped to bring a quicker end to the war. It didn't seem to bother Mr. Cronkite that the bodies were those of South Vietnamese brutally killed by the North Vietnamese during Tet, nor did it seem to bother him that he had compromised his own objectivity in reporting the war. Of course, we who have dedicated our lives defending the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic certainly believe in all its provisions to include the First Amendment. I just hope what we saw in the press in Vietnam and still see today isn't as good as it gets. Our nation deserves better.

The second myth is that somehow the soldiers in Vietnam were very different from those who served in WWII. The myth purports that the Vietnam soldier was much younger, poorly educated, forced to go to war against his will. It is often claimed that they disproportionately came from minority groups, while their better off social superiors dodged the draft and stayed safe at home out of harm's way. The truth is of course different. The average age of the soldiers in Vietnam was just under 23 compared to around 25 in WWII where mass conscription prevailed. The enlisted soldier in Vietnam was actually better educated. 79% had completed high school as opposed to just 24 % in WWII. In Vietnam 20 % of the EM's had college degrees, three times the number in the Second World War. In a democracy, even your jeep driver may be better educated than you. As far as social representation, studies have shown that blacks and Hispanics were actually slightly underrepresented compared to their percentage of the total population. For instance, African-Americans comprised 13.1% of the age group subject to the military, they comprised 12.6% of the armed forces, and represented

12.2% of the casualties. In 1992 a study looked at the 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam and found that 30 % came from families in the lowest third of the income range while 26% came from the highest. Not much of a disparity when you look at the facts.

A third myth is that draft evasion was rampant during the Vietnam era and higher than in WWII. Not so. During the Vietnam War about half a million men were draft dodgers, and I bet you know some of their names! Only about 9,000 cases were actually prosecuted and very few ever served prison time. In WWII, 350,000 were prosecuted for draft evasion and many went to prison. It is interesting to note that during Vietnam 10,000 Americans went to Canada, but up to 30,000 Canadians joined the US Armed Forces and of those 10,000 served in Vietnam. We all know cowardice in the face of the draft is not a new phenomenon, but during Vietnam it became an art form. More importantly, draft dodgers made themselves out to be ethical and moral while those of us who served were made out to be morally inferior, stupid, or just luckless. The radical Left on our campuses had a clear goal of transforming the shame of the self serving and fearful into the guilt of the courageous.

A fourth myth is that casualties were disproportionately higher for enlisted men than for officers. Actually, while officers killed in action accounted for 13.5 % of those who died in Vietnam, they comprised only 12% of the troop strength. Proportionally, more officers were killed than in WWII. In Vietnam, we lost twice as many company commanders as we did platoon leaders, confirming in the Vietnam War, leaders led from the front. Another interesting fact you can use to debunk a popular myth is that volunteers not draftees accounted for the majority (77 %) of combat deaths in Vietnam. How many of those do you think were 18 year olds? Just 101, or less than one tenth of one percent of all those killed.

Well, there are many other myths we could talk about, but instead I'd like to remind you of the humor that accompanied American soldiers in this war as it has all the others. I suspect many of you remember the time honored Murphy's Laws of Combat:

- Don't look conspicuous...it draws fire
- If it's stupid, but it works, it's not stupid
- If your attack is going really well, it's an ambush
- When you have secured an area, don't forget to tell the enemy
- Friendly fire...isn't
- Anything you do can get you shot, including doing nothing
- Never share a foxhole with someone braver than you are
- A sucking chest wound is just nature's way of telling you to slow down
- The buddy system is key to your survival...it gives the enemy someone else to shoot at
- It's not the one with your name on it you need to worry about, it's the one addressed: "To whom it may concern"

Remember, Nine million men and women served in the military during the 13 years of the War and three million of those served in the Vietnam theater. Two thirds of those who saw duty in Vietnam were volunteers and 77 % of those who died were volunteers. Our American citizen-soldier performed with a tenacity and quality that may never be fully appreciated or truly understood. Should anyone think the war was conducted in an incompetent manner should look at the numbers: Hanoi admits to 1.4 million of its soldiers killed on the battlefield compared to our 58,000., and about 250,000 South Vietnamese. And if someone tries to convince you that Vietnam was "a dirty little war" where Air Force and Navy bombs did all the work, you might remind them that this was the most costly war the grunts of the U.S. Marines Corps ever fought...five times as many dead as in WWI, three times as many dead as in Korea, and more total killed and wounded than in all of WWII.

To the Vietnam veterans here today and to all those whose name appears on the Wall, I say you are all heroes. Heroes who faced the issues of this war including your own possible death, and after weighing those concerns against your obligation to your country you decided to serve with honor. In the words of a timeless phrase found on the

Confederate Memorial in Arlington Cemetery, "not for fame or reward, not for place or for rank, but in simple obedience to duty, as they understood it." I ask each of you to treat each other with the dignity and respect you have earned. Reach out and welcome a fellow Vietnam Veteran home. God bless each of you, and may God continue to bless this America we love and serve.

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