

AUGUST 5, 2018 A gay D.C. club closes but leaves meaningful memories 18

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THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

A new wave of war memorials is coming to Washington. Are we all at peace with that? p.8



The Conflicts



A new wave of war memorials is coming to Washington.



Are we all at peace with that?



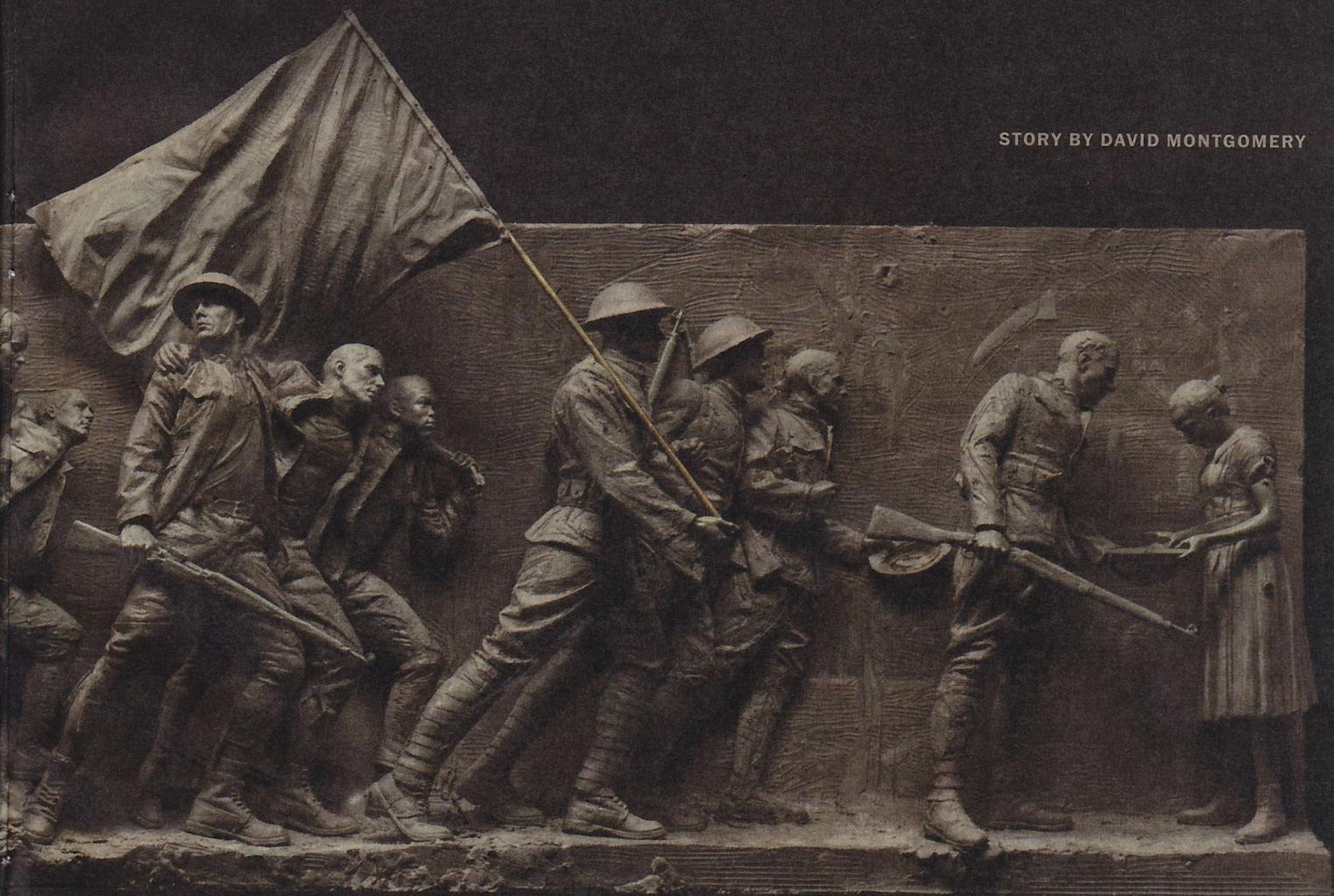
Twenty-seven years after his war ended, and seven years after his crusade to memorialize it began, Scott Stump stood before a presidentially appointed panel of architects and designers in June to advocate for his dream. This was the former Marine's fourth visit to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, which is charged with protecting the grace and dignity of public space in the nation's capital from clutter and kitsch.

Stump, from North Carolina, had discovered just how hard it can be to build anything on some of America's most soulful ground — anything at all, let alone a memorial to Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, those often-overlooked

missions in which 700,000 Americans served and 383 were killed. Early designs featured a rightward curving wall the color of desert sand, meant to embody the "left hook" battlefield maneuver that vanquished the Iraqi army on the ground in 100 hours. Counting the initial aerial bombardment, the combat phase lasted all of six weeks.

I knew from conversations with Stump before the hearing that he is a passionate encyclopedia of all the slights he has heard from panel members and others about the relative importance of that Gulf War. It was launched in January 1991, after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Skeptics call it a bloodless "video-game war," a mere prologue to the nation's wars following the

STORY BY DAVID MONTGOMERY





Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, too short to be historically significant. “That’s like a boxer saying, ‘Man, I really regret knocking him out in 30 seconds. We should have strung it out for 15 rounds!’” Stump told me. “This was a really big deal. ... It validated that America was back in business.”

Legislation approving the National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial had already been signed by President Trump; the question now was where to put it. “Visitability is by far the most important to us and millions of our future visitors,” Stump told the panel. That’s why he favored the prominent southwest corner of Constitution Avenue and 23rd Street NW. It’s across a patch of grass from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and a short walk from the Lincoln Memorial. But the fine arts commission had been urging another site that is a quarter-mile from the Mall, across a tangle of traffic lanes, on the shore of the Potomac River.

Stump, who is the president of the National Desert Storm War Memorial Association, let his big guns do most of the talking at the hearing. They included the bipartisan duo of Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, who complained that the river site “is not contiguous with other war

memorials,” and Sen. Joe Donnelly (D-Ind.), who said, “Our nations’ monuments share the story of our country. It can’t fully be told without a National Desert Storm War Memorial.” Skip Graffam, a partner in the landscape design firm that is working on the memorial, code-talked expertly in the gnomic language of grass and stone symbology that is music to the commission’s ears; he suggested how the left hook could be embedded in a quarter-acre of land and form an elegant thematic connection to nearby monuments.

As the commissioners deliberated, I felt the tide turning toward Stump. One by one, most members of the panel said they were coming around to the idea that the site close by Lincoln and Vietnam might be just the place to remember Desert Storm — and in short order the commission handed victory to Stump and his allies.

Before the vote, however, the lone dissenter, vice chairman Elizabeth K. Meyer, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Virginia, spoke up in a quiet voice. The daughter and sister of career military officers chose her words carefully, because a vote against even the site of a veterans memorial can be interpreted as a vote against veterans, and the commission had already received angry messages along

those lines. Meyer said she didn’t think Desert Storm was “historically significant enough” to merit such a prized location. Then she raised a deeper and more unsettling question that I had been thinking about as well — one that gets at the nation’s relationship with war and remembrance in the heart of Washington.

“I’m also concerned about the proliferation of war memorials on the National Mall,” she said. “The Mall is a public space that symbolizes our collective national identity, and we’re more than wars. We’re more than commemorating the dead. ... What is the threshold when the Mall becomes essentially a cemetery? A war memorial zone, with no space for anything else, for the way in which we gather together and construct our national identity through the kinds of things we do together on the Mall?”

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. But the 1982 dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial launched a war-memorial-building boom. Monuments to those who served in Korea (1995) and World War II (2004) followed. Since then, the pace of one per decade has dramatically in-



These pages:
Preliminary renderings of the National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial.
Pages 8-11: Details of a model of the proposed National World War I Memorial.

creased. Today, five war memorials are being planned for spots on or near the Mall. In addition to Desert Storm, they will commemorate World War I, the global war on terrorism, Native American veterans, and African Americans — both free and enslaved — who served in the American Revolution. On top of that, all three existing national memorials have been approved for expansions: Fundraising is underway for an underground education center beside the Vietnam memorial; the Korean War Veterans Memorial is slated to get its own Vietnam-style wall etched with the names of the more than 36,000 American military personnel who were killed; and, more modestly, a plaque with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's D-Day prayer is being designed for the National World War II Memorial.

War memorials are exceedingly popular with politicians and the public. President Obama signed legislation authorizing two that are now in the works: World War I and African Americans in the Revolution. Trump, in addition to backing the Desert Storm memorial, also signed legislation waiving the statutory 10-year post-war waiting period so planning could begin on the Global War on Terrorism Memorial. 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.

The righteousness of each individual memorial is compelling. Yet the question raised by Elizabeth Meyer is difficult to dismiss. Washington's public spaces on and around the Mall are a kind of mirror of American values — with celebrations, protests and everyday life filling in around the ideas, ideals, achievements and sacrifices described by the museums and monuments. This reflection is always evolving in step with the nation's passions and preoccupations. But 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?

As of the early 20th century, the only significant monument on the Mall was the tall, pale obelisk to George Washington. The story of America that would be told there in marble and granite over the next 100-plus years had yet to be drafted. When the planners of the Mall as we know

it today considered their options back in 1901, they deemed the preservation of the Union during the Civil War to be the great nation-shaping drama after the founding of the republic. Enlarging on Pierre L'Enfant's original 1791 layout, they framed the Mall's two-mile east-west axis with two Civil War-related monuments: the Lincoln Memorial, constructed on drained and filled land to the west, and the group of statues commemorating Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and his troops, set beneath the U.S. Capitol to the east. So the Mall is literally bookended by allusions to war.

But consider those two memorials a little more closely: Both dedicated in 1922, they were conceived more as tributes to great men — Lincoln and Grant — than as memorials to the war that made them great. And compare how those monuments have fared in the living history of the Mall. The Grant memorial, the work most explicitly depicting a man and his troops at war, is admired by art experts as a masterpiece of emotive sculpture, with a modern sense of the shadows and ambiguities of war captured in the general's solemn self-absorption. Yet its meaning is limited by its literal evocation of a long-ago war. There is no appeal to a greater national story. As a consequence it is largely over-

looked by visitors.

The Lincoln Memorial, on the other hand, with its chiseled texts of his Gettysburg Address and second inaugural address, is about ideals that transcended the murdered president and his war. The memorial speaks to the unfinished work of the American experiment once the guns became silent: "It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us ... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds." The meaning of the Lincoln Memorial never gets stuck in the past because America is forever in need of a new birth of freedom, and it always has wounds to bind.

Those were the last major war-related memorials for many decades (not counting three that weren't national in scope: one on the Mall commemorating residents of Washington killed in World War I, and two adjacent to the Mall in honor of troops of the First and Second divisions killed in that war). By 1982, however, the nation was wracked with guilt over the disdainful treatment that many Vietnam veterans had received when they returned home. Jan Scruggs, a veteran, led the effort to build a memorial that would serve as a site of individual and national healing. In her winning design submission, Maya Lin proposed a wall cut into the earth that would draw power and meaning from the emotion that visitors brought to it: "The memorial is composed not as an unchanging monument, but as a moving composition to be understood as we move into and out of it," she wrote in her submission. "It is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss." The Wall has lived up to that ambition, with mourners tracing names and leaving thousands of mementos, helping to bind the nation's wounds after a cultural and generational civil war.

The success of the Vietnam memorial energized veterans of other wars. But these next projects — more like the Grant sculpture, and less like the Lincoln or Vietnam memorials — eschewed any reach for a mythic plane. They confined themselves to telling the limited — albeit heroic — stories of particular wars. At the Korea memorial, the statues of a patrol dressed in uniforms of various branches that served, and the engraved details about the inter-

national coalition and the number of casualties, will help ensure that the conflict is no longer the "forgotten war." And the World War II Memorial serves as a place of triumphant return for members of the Greatest Generation. Yet the pair lack the transcendent power of the Lincoln and Vietnam because, beyond slogans — "Freedom is not free," "Americans came to liberate, not to conquer" — they don't grapple with big concepts about America or the legacy of war.

Setting aside the relative merits of the memorials, though, it was clear that war memorializing was becoming a habit. What about World War I, whose last U.S. veteran, Frank Buckles, died in 2011? "Once you do have national memorials to the three other great wars of the 20th century, if you don't have one to World War I — which, by the way, directly or indirectly led to all those other wars — then you are sending a new message that World War I doesn't deserve one," Edwin Fountain, vice chairman of the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission, told me. "If those other memorials didn't exist, would we be advocating for a National World War I Memorial now? I don't know."

And so 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.

In deed, there are worthy reasons behind each of the war memorials that are being planned. "This is like no other memorial that has been constructed or will be constructed in Washington because it gets right down to the essence of who we are," Maurice Barboza, a business consultant, told me of his plan for the National Liberty Memorial, the one that will honor African Americans who served in the Revolution. "These are the most important Americans with respect to patriotism and the concept of liberty because they had none, and yet they were willing to give their lives in the hopes that they'd be able to share in that, or that future generations would be able to enjoy it."

The week after the site of the Desert



NATIONAL WORLD WAR I MEMORIAL

Location: Pershing Park

Estimated cost: \$42 million (including park renovation)

Status: Awaiting final design approval

Planned year of completion: 2021

NATIONAL DESERT STORM AND DESERT SHIELD MEMORIAL

Location: Southwest corner of Constitution Avenue and 23rd Street NW

Estimated cost: \$25 million

Status: Awaiting final design approval

Planned year of completion: 2021

NATIONAL NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS MEMORIAL

Location: The grounds of the National Museum of the American Indian

Estimated cost: \$8 million

Status: Winning design is being refined

Planned year of completion: 2020

GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM MEMORIAL

Location: To be determined

Estimated cost: To be determined

Status: Congressionally authorized; seeking approval for a site near the Mall

Planned year of completion: 2024

NATIONAL LIBERTY MEMORIAL (TO AFRICAN AMERICANS WHO FOUGHT IN THE REVOLUTION)

Location: Authorized for a site to be determined near the Mall

Estimated cost: \$15 million

Status: Fundraising campaign being launched

Planned year of completion: 2021

Storm memorial was approved, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian unveiled the winning design for the National Native American Veterans Memorial, created by Harvey Pratt, a Cheyenne and Arapaho artist who served in Vietnam. Native Americans join the military at rates higher than other ethnicities, according to studies, and they have been dying for this nation since Samuel Ashbow Jr., a Mohegan, was killed at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. Nevertheless, a year after Bunker Hill, Thomas Jefferson referred to Native Americans in the Declaration of Independence as “merciless Indian savages,” and for the next century elements of the U.S. military waged war on some Native Americans. “It’s a very difficult history that deserves to be recognized, like any other monument where you should stand before it and ponder all of the things that monument is telling you about our history,” says Kevin Brown, chairman of the Mohegan Tribe, in Connecticut, who graduated from West Point and was a battalion commander in Iraq.

Scott Stump, for his part, has thought deeply about Desert Storm’s larger meaning. It marked a historic “pivot” for the nation, he told me. Not only did it show the comeback of American military excellence after the debacle of Vietnam, it was the first U.S. war fought with all volunteers, and it was the conflict that made “thank you for your service” a cliché, as the non-serving public embraced these veterans and the ones who would follow. Globally, Stump continues, it signaled the end of the Cold War, with the United States leading a coalition of nearly three dozen nations that included three former Soviet satellites. “This is not a place of mourning, although remembering the fallen is of utmost importance,” he says. “There are many good aspects of Operation Desert Storm that some American citizens may have forgotten or need to be reminded of.”

For Michael “Rod” Rodriguez, executive director of the Global War on Terror Memorial Foundation, and for supporters like retired Gen. George W. Casey Jr., it is a point of pride that this project will radically alter notions of what a memorial is. “We’re pursuing the position of thought leader in this space,” Rodriguez, a retired Green Beret, told me. “It will be the first national memorial in Washington author-

ized for an ongoing war,” Casey, former commander of coalition forces in Iraq, wrote in *The Washington Post*. The memorial will commemorate those who have served in conflicts since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, not just in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also operations in the Horn of Africa, Southeast Asia and elsewhere. At 17 years and counting, it is the nation’s longest period of sustained combat. Nearly 7,000 American military personnel have been killed, and some of their loved ones have already waited longer for a national memorial than it took to put up the Vietnam Wall. Rodriguez has done the math: Some of those who fought at the beginning in Afghanistan are now approaching their 60s. A reasonable pace for the memorial effort, which started last year, would lead to a dedication in 2024. “If we don’t do this now, when are we going to do it?” he explains. “We want to avoid what happened to everybody else.”

War memorials are among the most popular stops on tourists’ Washington itineraries: Last year the Vietnam Wall drew 5.1 million; World War II, 4.9 million; Korean War, 4.2 million, according to the National Park Service. That’s more than the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial and the Washington Monument (when it was open). Only the Lincoln (8 million) draws more.

I visited the war memorial zone on a recent Thursday afternoon. Each crowded attraction evoked a different mood. It was most somber within the angle of the Vietnam Wall, where a man stood with his head bowed and his hand pressed against a name carved into the warm black granite. Lost lives were conjured in a few words on an envelope left with a faded picture.

Over at the World War II Memorial, the atmosphere was lighter. That war was grander and less morally complicated than Vietnam; the memorial is more elaborate and less introspective. It feels more like a history lesson, with lists of battles and quotes from leaders, and guides decoding architectural features. The whoosh of the fountain makes visitors raise their voices, which drowns reverent quietude, and people dangle their feet in the water, ponder-

ing their next maneuver across the Mall.

The Korean War installation falls somewhere between mourning and learning. Five children smile for a camera under the carved slogan “Freedom is not free.” A father recites the succession of wars — “It goes World War II, five-year break, Korea, 12-year break, Vietnam” — but his son loses interest before he completes the list.

The visitors I spoke to consider the war memorials essential pieces of the Mall’s mosaic. “It’s like chapters of a book,” Robert Hamilton, 65, an orthopedic brace designer from Orlando, told me after he had taken a panoramic photo of the Vietnam Wall. “You start at one end” — the Capitol — “and you’re hearing all about the beginning of the birth of our country. Then, unfortunately, the desecration of the Indians” — as recalled at the National Museum of the American Indian — “which we are sorry for now, but we did. Then you go on to all the innovations the United States has done” — the various other Smithsonian museums — “and how we’ve been a leader in the world. Then you come over to this area where we are learning all about not just World War II but Vietnam and the Korean War. All the sacrifices that this country has made for itself and other nations.”

When I told Hamilton about the coming memorials to Desert Storm, the war on terrorism and so forth, he was glad to hear it. “Every time you look a little further, a chapter unfolds about what is America,” he said. “Trump was saying yesterday he wants to have a Space Force. That’s the future of what we’re doing.” (I tried to imagine how we will memorialize the first conflict waged by that new extraterrestrial branch of the military that the president intends to create. Holograms, I thought. It will definitely involve holograms.)

Russell Dahmer, a civil engineer from St. Louis, was visiting the World War II Memorial with his wife, Marjorie, a homemaker and community volunteer. Both their fathers served in the war. “The Mall covers all the great history of the nation,” he said, and war is part of it. I told him about the Desert Storm memorial — and the concern that we are verging on changing the character of the Mall with too many war memorials. “We all seek peace, but sadly it has taken war to preserve, protect and defend, as the Constitution itself says,”

he replied. "It has taken the sacrifice of our sons. There is always somebody wanting to take it from you. So these struggles have been necessary. Sad and unfortunate, but necessary. And those who sacrificed to make it all possible deserve their place in the sun."

It's no wonder that, even as new construction has been barred on most of the Mall, pressure to build as close to the Mall as possible — and for each new war memorial to share the visitor traffic of the others — is immense. And while my conversations with the veterans building memorials and with the memorial admirers on the Mall didn't exactly rebut the objection raised by Meyer at the Desert Storm hearing, they did make a case for memorials that demands to be taken seriously. After all, would we even have a country without the sacrifice of fighting men and women? Isn't it accurate to see a warrior included in the Mall's reflection?

Yet it is still true that there is just not enough room for the proverbial "place in the sun" on or near the Mall for all those who served in all the wars that have been and will be. And the problem is not just spatial; it is also thematic. Should so much of our limited public space at the center of Washington be dedicated to that single subject of armed conflict? In his 2009 book "Monument Wars," about the transformation of the memorial landscape in the D.C., Kirk Savage traces ambivalence toward the "militarism" of public spaces in Washington as far back as the 1800s. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1866, William Dean Howells decried a 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." A profusion of such memorials, he worried, would "misrepresent us and our age to posterity; for we are not a military people, (though we certainly know how to fight upon occasion)."

I wonder: Before the Mall began to rival Arlington National Cemetery for its war memorials, would it have been better to erect a single National War Memorial — a work of monumental art to honor all the men and women who served, for all time? The Vietnam Veterans Memorial — with

its Lincolnesque ambition to once again bind up the nation's wounds — came closest to that, back when it was the only national war memorial on the Mall. The spare design seemed to exist outside history, and the cascade of names seemed capable of representing all who had never returned since Lexington and Concord. Veterans from other wars and people who never served stood shoulder to shoulder before the Wall, staring at their own haunted reflections within the names of the dead, with the Washington Monument cast deeper in the reflection like a bone-colored sentinel. Now, for better or worse, fundraising is underway for the Vietnam memorial's planned expansion. The projected underground education center will add facts and context to make the memorial more specifically about Vietnam — narrower and less universal.

Of all the war memorial efforts underway, it may be the National World War I Memorial that offers the best model for the future — one that resolves some of the tension between the push to commemorate wars and the goal of fostering a well-rounded national narrative in the iconography of the Mall and monumental Washington. Despite an ardent lobbying campaign, advocates of the memorial did not win approval for a Mall site; now, the project is planned for dilapidated Pershing Park, which is on Pennsylvania Avenue NW, a long block from the Mall. They are trying to make the best of the location, and if they succeed, future memorial builders might be tempted to venture even farther, such as to that site on the Potomac that the Desert Storm folks spurned. "We hope we're doing a service by showing that events like this can be commemorated off the Mall," Fountain, of the World War I centennial group, told me. "Because we are not done commemorating wars."

Moreover, the creative challenge of respecting the park setting while making a memorial to a war whose details have been forgotten has both forced and freed designer Joe Weishaar and his team to think in more universal terms — like the best of war memorials. The central feature will be an ambitious bronze sculpture by Sabin Howard, an artist based in New York City. While design details are still under review, the plan is for it to stretch 56 feet across one side of the park and to feature larger-

than-life human figures in high relief. On the advice of his wife, the novelist Traci L. Slatton, Howard decided to make this work a story, and he adapted the archetypal plot of the hero's journey — departure, ordeal, wisdom gained, return — that scholars have identified in tales of civilizations from around the globe and throughout history. In the first section of a resin model of the sculpture, a father bids farewell to his daughter. The father-hero recurs in scenes of battle and aftermath. "This is a war memorial that is specific to this war because of the uniforms and because of the gestures and the poses, but it is also a universal message about war and also about life," Howard told me. "And the message ultimately is about healing and the unity of mankind."

In another section, the hero stands still, separate from the action, staring out of the sculpture at us. His thousand-yard gaze recalls a doughboy's "shell shock" or post-traumatic stress disorder. But it also captures other legacies of World War I: industrialized destruction and the modernist alienation it wrought, which has molded human perception ever since. "It's the father that has been transformed, and also the United States that's been transformed," Howard says.

At the end, the father has returned home, and he hands his doughboy's helmet to his daughter. She holds it like a bowl, peering deeply into it, head bowed. She is divining the future, says Howard. The daughter intuits that she is being handed the next war and, by extension, the one after that, and the one after that. The rest of us know something else that she may not have guessed yet: She is being handed the next war memorial as well. ■

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Sculptor Sabin Howard aims to make the National World War I Memorial specific to the war and yet universal in its message.



Photo: Rick Wenner