

REMARKS OF JAMES WEBB, PRESS CONFERENCE OF 4 NOVEMBER 1982

It gives me no pleasure to be here today. I and most other Vietnam veterans would love to see this debate finally end. But we are also mindful that the Memorial will occupy a permanence in the national mindset, with an even greater power than history itself. History can be re-evaluated. New facts can be discovered, leading to different interpretations. But a piece of art remains, as a testimony to a particular moment in history, and we are under a solemn obligation to get that moment down as correctly as possible.

So we are talking about art, but we are also talking about history, and whether the portion of the arts community that has backed this wall will admit it or not, we are talking about politics. Plato once said that "art is politics." There is no clearer indication of this than the past year or so of argument regarding the clearly nihilistic design that the arts community would like to call the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

For the past eighteen months, many in the arts community and the media have been indulging the fantasy that two submerged black walls bearing the names of the Vietnam dead are first a work of art, and second a fitting affirmative tribute to all who served in that war. It is beyond me how anyone could view these walls as art, although I understand that it could be perceived as an appropriate design solution, in the architectural sense — that is, it meets some minimum mandate of placing a memorial that few in the arts community desired, in a place where few of them wanted a memorial. But it is hardly a great work of art. Maya Lin's professor at Yale verified that when he gave the project a "B" in his Funerary Architecture course.

And it is hardly a tribute to those who served. An overwhelming majority of Vietnam veterans who have written or spoken about the wall have ended up on the same bottom line: it is incomplete, negative, nihilistic, sad. A place not for celebration, but to go and be depressed.

I served as an original member of the National Sponsoring committee for the Memorial, and as minority counsel on the House Veterans Committee during the time the legislation passed. When the design was announced, I called Jack Wheeler, the Chairman of the Board of VVMF, and asked him if there had been a Vietnam veteran on the jury — it is accepted practice for competitions such as this to have such a layperson. I was told that no Vietnam veterans were qualified. I was then asked to make no public statements for a month or two, to let the design grow on me, and then to come in and talk about what might be done to modify it. I did remain silent, and within that time period the VVMF quietly moved before the Fine Arts Commission and obtained approval for the project. There was very little dissent. Everyone was sitting around, letting the design grow on them, at the behest of the VVMF.

Understandably, many people felt betrayed. There followed

months of outcries, and finally the compromise agreement of March, 1982, which stipulated that the wall would remain, but that the tone of the Memorial would be changed, with the addition of a sculpture and a flag, the flag at the apex of the two walls, and the sculpture immediately in front of them. This was not Secretary Watt and Ross Perot, as the Memorial Fund has tried to maintain in the press. It was dozens of responsible, caring Vietnam veterans who were remembering their less articulate compatriots, and the dishonor that was being done them.

This was a very specific compromise, and it was only under these constraints that the wall was allowed to be built. The sculpture and the flag would interact with the wall, making one memorial that would more affirmatively honor service. I accepted an appointment to the Sculpture Panel, along with three others. For six months we worked on the sculpture and its placement. We contracted with the highest ranking sculptor in the original design competition, who produced a work of art that Vietnam veterans have already come to love. We gave careful consideration to those who believe the wall is appropriate. We moved the flag forty feet away from the apex. We moved the sculpture almost 180 feet away, where it would be framed by the treeline but still exert its power on the design. We worked with the project architect, and with our own architectural consultant. We obtained the approval of VVMF's Board of Directors, the project architect (who "enthusiastically endorsed" our concept), the consultant architect, and just about every Veterans group known to man, from the Gold Star mothers to the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

On the other side was the American Institute of Architects, which condemned the solution in July, two months before it was even arrived at, Maya Lin, Paul Spreiregin, who was the Svengali of the original design competition, and a splinter group left over from Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Yet we lost, and the decision of the Fine Arts Commission was wrapped in blowsy words about a sculpture shivering out in the cold, and how it was inappropriate for one piece of art to be allowed to interfere with the message of another. On this last point, I am reminded of Mr. Spreiregin's assertion before the Commission that the compromise was inappropriate because no sculptures existed in Arlington National Cemetery, to lurk over the gravestones.

I am reminded of that, because it is the key to understanding the political issue in this unfortunate debate, which has been camouflaged in such quibbling about art. Certainly there have been no sculptures in Arlington National Cemetery. But there has never been a mass tomb on the Mall before, either. Why is it that those who opposed the war become so threatened when they contemplate putting this sculpture in a place that will remove the nihilism from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial? Perhaps I can sum it up this way: not unlike Moby Dick, this is more than a story about a whale.

Think of this, please. Ask yourselves, what is public art? What function does it perform? What messages does it convey?

Plato said art is politics, and I must say, as an artist of the

written word, that art is certainly metaphor — choosing symbolic events to tell a story larger than your plot or canvas or figures. Public art, and particularly public art that commemorates a political event, is unavoidably political. It becomes a political statement about the event. So when you are walking down the grandiose steps of the Lincoln Memorial, after having peered at the huge statue of the Great Man sitting and contemplating his great words along the inner walls, watching then the white phallus that is the Washington Monument piercing the air like a bayonet, you feel uplifted. You are supposed to feel uplifted. That was the intention of the designers. That is the political message. And then when you peer off into the woods at this black slash of earth to your left, this sad, dreary mass tomb nihilistically commemorating death, you are hit with that message also. That is the debate. That is the tragedy of this memorial for those who served.

And it is remediable. But only partially, and only if the tone of the wall is adjusted, so that the metaphor, the symbols, are different. That is why we keep pushing on this. That is also why, in this very unusual circumstance of political compromise and serious reliance, it would be appropriate for the Congress to act on the placement of the flag and statue at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.