

Statement on S2042 by
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Chairman, Commission of Fine Arts
before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Public Lands, National Parks, and Forests,
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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, in compliance with your request that I testify, as Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts, on the proposed legislation concerning the introduction of an additional statue on the site of the Vietnam Memorial, I would like to offer the following comments.

If this legislation is passed, and, even without it, if any new proposal of this kind should be submitted to the Commission, we would keep an open mind and look at any proposal on its merits. In the spirit of open-mindedness, I believe the proposed legislation could be improved by entering less into the design specifics of what it endorses; rather, it might refer to "a specific commemoration of women Vietnam veterans" whenever it now calls for "a statue of a woman."

Meanwhile, I would like to take this opportunity to review for the Committee some of the events and thinking that have led up to the point at which we are today.

The Congress has, as I see it, already taken four important actions that relate to this issue. First of all, it authorized the Vietnam Veterans Memorial itself in 1980 in Public Law 96-297, "in honor and recognition of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam war." That the Congress's mandate has been carried out is proclaimed, for the millions of annual visitors to see reaffirmed, in the inscription at the very center, which reads, "In honor of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam War."

The resulting memorial has been as successful as any in history. Those who may have had doubts based on the original drawings cannot pass by the completed work unmoved, and the effect on the visitor has now become legendary. On those walls are inscribed the names of all those who gave their lives, men and women alike.

Second, in 1986 the Congress passed Public Law 99-652, known as the Commemorative Works Act, in order to guard against the proliferation of statuary and memorials in the monumental core of Washington. The need for this legislation was partly triggered by the very success of the Vietnam Memorial as it now stands, and the natural impulse is for every group to want to achieve memorialization. Very wisely, the Congress has foreseen where this could lead, and has taken a very commendable initiative in applying brakes to a process that, if left completely to the winds of political opportunism, could conceivably make a travesty of the memorials we now have.

Third, the Congress has recognized the deep debt of gratitude this nation owes the dedicated and heroic women who have served the Armed Forces of this country in Vietnam, and in all wars, by passing, also in 1986, Public Law 99-610, authorizing a memorial specifically for women in the monumental core

of the Capital area. A memorial to nurses who have served their country in war already exists in Arlington Cemetery. The Congressional mandate I refer to goes beyond that, however, and beyond the current legislative proposal which is limited to the women who served in Vietnam. In PL 99-610, Congress implicitly underscored the importance of fairness, and of not excluding the contributions of women in all other wars. This memorial would include the heroic uniformed women of the Vietnam conflict, who number some ten thousand, but it would also recognize, for example, the over three-hundred-and-fifty thousand women who served in World War II. Some of these were shot down in action delivering bombers from U.S. factories, and, in other countless ways served our country in degrees of sacrifice that are beyond measure. Although breaking out the Vietnam component and treating it separately does not, theoretically, preclude the memorial that has already been authorized by Congress, in the practical world of fund-raising, since all of these must be built with private funds, it does, undeniably, interfere with it.

Fourth, the Congress has created two commissions, the Commission of Fine Arts in 1910, and the National Capital Planning Commission in 1924, specifically to serve the people of this country by bringing to bear expert opinion on issues of just this kind. Congress has then and since consistently recognized that questions of design are not best resolved by large legislative bodies. As to the Fine Arts Commission's role, we believe that a wrongly designed memorial will, over the years, do a disservice to the cause it is attempting to serve, and thus we feel the Commission's role lies in the line of patriotic duty to the long-term interests to the nation as a whole.

Historically, the Commission of Fine Arts is very proud of its specific role over the past fifteen years in helping to bring about the highly successful Vietnam Memorial that exists today. In the beginning, on that site, were the "tempos," the temporary office buildings that cluttered the Mall as an expedient of World War I, and remained until, finally, President Nixon took up the cudgels personally, and got them torn down. His idea for that space, north of the Reflecting Pool, however, was to create a "Tivoli" on the Mall, and the Fine Arts Commission fought the concept of an amusement park on that site as inappropriate. The resulting landscape design we believe is enormously successful. Constitution Gardens, as that site is called, contains a very beautiful meadow, whose point is its flatness in contrast to the great vertical statements made by the Lincoln and Washington Monuments. Therefore, when we first heard that the Congress had mandated a memorial in that area, we had grave misgivings. We were thus immensely relieved when we found that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial jury had chosen, from the 1421 designs submitted, a solution offered by a talented designer, herself a woman, which took the given of that flatness and moulded it into the Memorial we now know and cherish. Its long arms point each to the great presidential memorials, and thus in a sense incorporate by reference the ideals for which our Armed Forces suffered in Vietnam.

We are particularly proud of the Fine Arts Commission's role in making it possible for the present Memorial to exist at all. So deep was our conviction of the importance of the subject, that these heroic veterans, men and women, should be recognized on the Mall, and so impressed were we with the design by Maya Lin, that I risked the opprobrium of the arts community in this country in pleading with my fellow Commission members to give in to the demand of the then-Secretary of the Interior, Secretary Watt, that we agree in principle to

the addition of a bronze sculpture and flag, before he would release the building permit that would allow any memorial to be constructed.

As to the flag, this presented little problem, even though we were trying to avoid vertical elements, as long as it could be properly sited. The idea of placing it at the apex of the wall, like a golf tee, would have rendered a tremendous disservice to our national flag, as no vertical element of that scale could look anything but silly in immediate juxtaposition with the enormous stretch of wall and emotional power of the Memorial as designed. That apex, reflecting as it does our two greatest American monuments, is already charged with patriotic meaning and needs no further prettification.

As to adding any sculptural group, it certainly was with heavy misgivings that I and my fellow Commission members reached this compromise in our own minds, but we felt that if the right sculptor were involved, and the location of the statuary were sensitively enough placed, we could just get away with one such exception without destroying the extraordinary integrity and power of the basic Memorial itself.

I believe we did just get away with it, as the present sculpture sets up a kind of dynamic balance, an interaction with the Memorial, and serves as an explicatory entrance experience for those who approach the Memorial from the Lincoln Memorial, which so many do.

The solution offered by the Vietnam Veterans for a specific sculpture was to resort to symbolism, as there was no way a literal depiction could be made to include all the elements who fought or served in Vietnam. It is the device, honored over the millenia, of having the part stand for the whole. Many heroic Americans are not literally depicted in that sculptural element. Among them, it is true, are the ten thousand women who served as part of a uniformed force numbering over three million, or as it happens, less than half of one percent.

But the point of the memorial is not the piece of sculpture that got added to it. The original Memorial, the wall, stands to honor all, and is explicitly inclusive. The emotional issue today, I recognize, is triggered by the bronze that is there now, which tends to produce envy on the part of anyone belonging to any sub-group that is not visually depicted by those three infantrymen. The Commission felt in its review this fall that including a white, Army nurse would only continue and exacerbate that process of exclusion. It is a slippery slope.

I sketch in this history, Mr. Chairman, merely to establish for the record that this is perhaps a more complicated issue than it may appear on the surface, and that the Fine Arts Commission action this fall was not taken capriciously or prejudicially. If there is a conceptual flaw in including any statuary, we questioned whether it could ever be corrected by merely adding more. Two wrongs don't make a right. If this year's legislation says we stop with just one more addition, what does next year's legislation say?

I commend this Committee on taking valuable time to review this matter, and my fellow Commissioners and I look forward to the opportunity of continuing, objectively and open-mindedly, to serve this Congress in any way it asks.