Truth, Memory, and Civic Reconciliation without Apology

Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. . . . Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

Santayana

Throughout this study I have argued that interpersonal forgiveness as well as political apology require that the truth be told and heard. Both are therefore committed not only to truth telling, but to the proposition that it is better to remember than to forget. I also argued that both may promote reconciliation within their respective spheres and in their respective senses of the term, which is to say that the reconciliation they afford is built on truth and memory. I did not argue that reconciliation is impossible without forgiveness or apology. In this concluding chapter, I discuss a well known and fascinating candidate for civic reconciliation that is certainly committed to remembering, but is silent on the question of apology and forgiveness, in spite of the fact that its context was that of war and bitter civic discord. I do not offer it as an example of failed apology, but as an intriguing counter-example to the theses I have advanced. What are its successes and failures? What does it teach us about the relationship between truth telling, narrative, memory, political apology, and civic reconciliation (I am not focusing here on international reconciliation)?

A people’s memory of itself is expressed in part through its narrative, and that narrative can be and often is presented not just discursively but

also in stone, wood, and metal. War memorials are particularly instructive when considered as sites of memory and truth telling. By definition, moral issues of justification, liability, and apology are inseparable from communal remembering of war. These issues become all the more pressing and perplexing in at least two sorts of cases: civil war, and a war in which one suffered defeat. As of this writing, the greatest modern foreign policy catastrophe for the United States was the Vietnam War. The United States not only lost – completely and unequivocally – but waged war at tremendous human, financial, and civic cost. The internal discord, moral hatred, and institutional damage caused by the enterprise was incalculable. For the nation as a whole, the defeat in Vietnam was unprecedented. Civic reconciliation was desperately needed, and it would have to take form in some sort of shared narrative. How is a calamity of this magnitude and character to be remembered?

For several decades, the answer in the United States was – as little as possible. Especially as far as the federal government was concerned, the story was not to be told. And this determined forgetfulness by the collectivity that was keenly felt as an insult, a denial of due recognition for the sacrifices made by those who served their nation in the war. The war’s disrepute had devolved upon its soldiers. It is as though the nation first sought to purify itself of its loss by shifting the stain to those it had sent to fight, sending them away again...this time into official oblivion. The resentment felt in response added yet another layer to the hatreds engendered by the war.

With the decision to memorialize the war, a chance for reconciliation finally presented itself. The act of civic memory I have in mind is inscribed in the symbolic heart of the capital city of the United States, namely “the Mall” in Washington, DC. But the decision to memorialize the war

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2 Other periods and other nations have of course also struggled with the problem of public memory. How did (and how should) the Southern Confederacy of the United States remember its soldiers who died – in vain – in defense of a cause inseparable from the preservation of slavery? To take a very different context, consider S. Friedländer’s observation on “what for some Germans seems to be an intractable predicament: the Nazi past is too massive to be forgotten, and too repellent to be integrated into the ‘normal’ narrative of memory. For the last forty years, Germans belonging to at least two generations have been caught between the impossibility of remembering and the impossibility of forgetting.” “Some German Struggles with Memory,” in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Context*, ed. G. Hartman, p. 27.

3 The Mall in its present shape is a fairly recent creation. Taking the White House, Capitol, and the monuments to Lincoln and Jefferson as reference points, the area defined is quadrilateral in shape, or more precisely, trapezoidal. At the west end of the area sits the Lincoln Memorial, and opposite it at the east end, the Capitol. The White House to the
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itself ignited a bitter round of controversy – in effect, a conflict over memory. Disputes about memorialization are not unusual, as the history of the other monuments on the nation’s Mall show. But this particular dispute centered on an unresolved issue: given that the war ended in total defeat, and that the morality of the cause lay at the heart of the domestic disagreement, should memory valorize the cause and those who served it? Or valorize the one but remain neutral on the other? Or valorize neither? The debate concerns the extent to which a memorial should unite war and politics, though in a peculiar context. The Mall’s land is sanctified neither in the sense that Verdun and Gettysburg are, because it is not a battlefield, nor in the sense definitive of the monumental Arlington National Cemetery (which is connected to the Mall by the Arlington Memorial Bridge). No one is buried on the Mall itself (with the exception of Mr. Smithson, who is buried in the Smithsonian Institution’s “Castle”). The Mall’s memorials connect (and occasionally separate) war and politics on a purely symbolic level.

The answer to the question as to how to remember the Vietnam War was the result of a massive amount of controversy, public commentary, an open competition among proposals, and revisions insisted upon by various governmental authorities. In a real sense it was the result of collective effort, sentiment, thought, and prejudice – as well as of a single individual’s brilliant architectural imagination. Amazingly – given the conflict that is at every level the context of the memorial – the designer turned out to be a woman, of Asian extraction, and too young to have had any direct involvement in the war or the domestic turbulence it caused.

north and the Jefferson Memorial to the south bisect the area vertically. For convenience I shall extend the usual nomenclature and refer to this area as the “Mall.” For all practical purposes, the center of the Mall is marked by the towering Washington Monument. The area derives its substantive unity not so much from its geometric properties as from its purpose, namely that of memorializing, and from the surprisingly tight set of symbolic connections between the monuments. It has been and continues to be a work in progress, as befits an unfinished narrative.

As an example, consider the torturous century-long history of the construction of a monument one would have thought relatively uncontroversial, viz., that dedicated to George Washington. See F. L. Harvey’s History of the Washington National Monument and Washington National Monument Society (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1903). No controversy about a national memorial has been, so far as I know, as divisive as that surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; and this is traceable to the unresolved question as to the justice of the war itself.

Maya Lin was at the time a twenty-one year old student. The criteria set down for the design competition – themselves the product of, as well as the occasion for conflict and debate – were that the monument (1) be reflective and contemplative in character, (2) be harmonious with its site and surroundings, (3) provide for the inscription of the names
The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) was dedicated in 1982 and rapidly became the most visited, commented upon, and imitated memorial in the United States. It sparked memorial building not just around the country, but also demands from many constituencies for memorials on the Mall to their heroes, causes, and suffering. To date, a Korean War Memorial, F. D. Roosevelt Memorial, World War II Memorial, and Holocaust Museum have followed the VVM on or near the Mall. More will join an already crowded field. It is a sort of stampede of claims to public memory, sympathy, and recognition, all connected in one way or another to suffering or the triumph over opposition. The VVM has had a profound effect on countless individuals who have visited it, as is shown by the reams of artifacts left at “the wall,” as though at a cemetery or site of pilgrimage (the artifacts are carefully collected and preserved by the National Park Service). It is the site of continued, communal remembrance, and has “spoken to” myriad visitors who have, in turn, responded with oceans of emotion, commentary, and what might be characterized as offerings. But what exactly is remembered, and what is forgotten? What truth is grasped, and what not? What is said, and what unsaid?

of those who gave their lives or remain missing, (4) make no political statement about the war, and (5) occupy up to two acres of land. Objections to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (hereafter VVM) are thus partly objections to the criteria for the competition. The design competition was open to all U.S. citizens over eighteen years of age. The jury of seven internationally known architects and one writer/design critic was selected by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF). A total of 1,421 entries were submitted to the competition. They were judged anonymously (identified to the jurors only by number). After deliberating, the jury unanimously recommended Lin’s design to the eight directors of the VVMF, who in turn accepted the nomination unanimously. The proposal then went through the lengthy federal approval process. After a rancorous and heated debate between supporters and opponents of the design, it was finally agreed to add a sculpture of three servicemen and, a bit further away, a flagpole to the Memorial site. Realistic statues of three soldiers (two of them white, one black) sculpted by Frederick Hart, and the flagpole were added in the area between the VVM and the Lincoln Memorial (the dedication ceremony was held on Veteran’s Day, November 13, 1982), constituting a sort of entrance device for those approaching from the southwestern side. The figures contemplate the names of the dead from a distance. The inscription at its base reads: “This flag represents the service rendered to our country by the veterans of the Vietnam War. The flag affirms the principles of freedom for which they fought and their pride in having served under difficult circumstances.” The statues and flagpole add a conventional, representational dimension to the memorializing of the Vietnam veterans. Still later, a sculpture of three nurses (all women) was also added toward the southeastern approach. They strike one as helpless and vulnerable (they seem to be waiting for a “medivac” helicopter), even as they also give care. These clusters are further testimony to the conflictual views about public memory and narration of the war – as well as to the importance attached to public recognition.
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It is a truism in empirical psychology that memory is selective and not merely replicative. As the editors of a recent volume on the subject put it, “a virtual consensus now exists among memory researchers that memory is a dynamic medium of experience shaped by expectancies, needs, and beliefs, imbued with emotion, and enriched by the inherently human capacity for narrative creation.” This is not to say, of course, that there is no distinction between truly and falsely remembering the past – else the notions of forgiveness and apology would hardly be worth our attention. It is to say that the distinction can become complicated, especially when the truth is that of a narrative in the sense of the term I have discussed.

All the more so, indeed, when the sphere is social or political, and the subject is war. We should be even more inclined to think of political narratives as reconstructive recollections of the past whose claim to tell “the truth” is best responded to critically. But we should not infer, to repeat a point, that the narratives are therefore “myths” and “false.” Certainly, civic memory is subject to political control, and its control is crucial to the exercise of power.

Orwell was on target when he wrote (in the voice of “the Party”) that “who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.” Political power, including in a democracy, can be exercised – at least in the short run – on the basis of the political equivalent of false or partial and distorted memories. Testimony is ample as to the efforts by the powerful to regulate communal memory – often by controlling how that memory is inscribed in public memorials – and correspondingly to extirpate competing memories. Yet the blend of

7 J. E. Young insightfully comments: “the usual aim in any nation’s monuments…is not solely to displace memory or to remake it in one’s own image: it is also to invite the collaboration of the community in acts of remembrance. To the extent that the myths or ideals embodied in a nation’s monuments are the people’s own, they are given substance and weight by such reification and will appear natural and true; hence, an inescapable partnership grows between a people and its monuments. It is at precisely this point, however, that a critical approach to memorials might rescue us from a complicity that allows our icons of remembrance to harden into idols of remembrance…. In effect, there can be no self-critical monuments, only critical viewers.” “Memory and Monument,” in Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective, ed. G. Hartman, p. 112. As will become evident, I take partial exception to the point that no monument is self-critical.
9 For example, consider C. Ugrešić’s comment on the bitter violence in the former Yugoslavia: “In the fragmented country both real and psychological wars were waged simultaneously. Mortar shells, psychological and real, wiped out people, houses, cities, children, bridges, memory. In the name of the present, a war was waged for the past; in the name of the future, a war against the present. In the name of a new future, the
truth, memory, and forgetfulness that is inscribed in the VVM is not simply the result of the top-down, or even the bottom-up, exercise of power. So crude a “reading” of the narrative fails to do justice to the complexity of the trauma that shaped the public memory of the war and is reflected in the Memorial.

At the same time, the VVM is the official expression, so to speak, of the nation’s sovereign body: it is built on land owned by the federal government, its construction approved by the United States Senate and ultimately the President; its design was vetted by and approved by officially constituted bodies of the government; it is lodged in the symbolic heart of the nation. The Memorial is therefore the nation’s statement on the war – primarily to the veterans, secondarily to the citizenry, and finally to the world, including of course the Vietnamese people. As of this writing, it is the only such statement offered by the American people through the proxy of their federal government.

The Memorial not only expresses a view about the war, but teaches how to remember it.10 The structures on the Washington Mall belong to a particular species of recollective architecture whose symbolic and normative content is prominent. When the subject is war and warriors, memorialization is pedagogy. Matter is put to rhetorical use, made to educate and edify the citizens of the present and form those of the future by persuading them to live out the virtues of the past. It is memory in stone, earth, and water, a patrimony articulated by measured expanses and the interplay of symmetrically arranged symbols. The word “monument” derives from the Latin “monere,” which means not just “to remind” but also “to admonish,” “warn,” “advise,” “instruct.” “Memorial” derives from “memoria.”

My purpose here is to shed further light on the conceptual relation between political apology and reconciliation by examining how civic memory has recorded and recounted to present and future generations war devoured the future. Warriors, the masters of oblivion, the destroyers of the old state and builders of new ones, used every possible strategic method to impose a collective amnesia. The self-proclaimed masters of life and death set up the co-ordinates of right and wrong, black and white, true and false.” Trans. C. Hawkesworth, The Culture of Lies (London: Phoenix, 1998), p. 6.

10 To quote Young once again: “Like literary and historical narratives, these memorials [of the Holocaust] recall the national myths, religious archetypes, and ideological paradigms along whose contours a history has been constructed – and perhaps acted upon.” And “for what is remembered here necessarily depends on how it is remembered; and how these events are remembered depends in turn on the icons that do the remembering.” “Memory and Monument,” p. 105.
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the meaning of a conflict whose justice was and is itself a subject of conflict. I shall begin with a brief interpretation of the Memorial, and then turn to an analysis of the conceptual relation.11

[i] THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL: AN INTERPRETATION

The VVM consists of two walls of polished black granite meeting at a 125 degree, 12 minute angle and tapering off at each end. These tips point like arrowheads to the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial. The angle is not, then, just any angle. The Memorial is utterly symmetrical, and neither beautiful nor sublime. When considered in abstraction from the directions they point, its two halves are identical except in the names inscribed and the dates of demise. The wall supports nothing and is not supported by any other structure; there is no internal tension in the design. Especially because its back is against a wall of earth, the Memorial is in no way indifferent to the position of the beholder.

Most of the other memorials on the Mall are either classical in design or have classical antecedents. It is difficult to find any allusion in the VVM to a historical style except by visual incorporation of the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial to which it points. Furthermore, unlike all the other memorials on the Mall, this one is invisible from a distance, particularly as one approaches it from the north (the outlines of the Memorial are visible when one reaches the flagpole and statues located between it and the Lincoln Memorial to the southwest). It demands that you enter into its space or miss it altogether.

One comes upon the VVM suddenly, and once there, is led down gently (access to the monument is provided by a path running its length, the grassy area in front being roped off). The observer sees a few names whose order is initially not clear; then more names; then many more. There are no steps. One descends to its heart, precisely where the incline is reversed. The centralizing axis of the monument is horizontal (by contrast, the axis of most other war memorials is vertical). The slowness of exposure to the Memorial is merciful, as then initial surprise turns slowly rather than all at once to shock as one realizes what one is viewing: over

58,000 names of Americans who died and are missing in action as a result of this war.

Walking down into the embrace of the Memorial, the visitor is engulfed even though the open sky is overhead and a large wide open space faces the monument. The VVM does not close the visitor in, not even in the way that the Lincoln Memorial may be said to do. The walls of the mural-like monument face south to catch the maximum sunlight. The south is the direction of sun, warmth, and life. In the descent toward the center of the monument there may be a delicate allusion to the ancient tholos tomb (such as the “tomb of Agamemnon” at Mycenae), buried in the earth and approached by an angled, graded passage downward. Yet this allusion is not strong enough to give the VVM a tomb-like feeling. No doubt the inscription of the names on the polished black granite closely resembles the gravestones in so many American cemeteries, a resemblance accentuated by the presence of flowers and small flags that visitors to the VVM frequently leave at its base. The VVM is to that extent a sort of national gravestone. Further, it possesses complex dimensions of meaning not exhibited by any ordinary gravestone. The suddenness of the visitor’s entry into the Memorial’s space, the demand that one gives complete attention to it even while remaining in a completely natural setting (without even a roof overhead), the impossibility of avoiding it once there – all these effects would be lost if the Memorial stood on higher ground, in plain view from a distance.

The logical (and chronological) beginning of the monument is neither of the two tips at which one necessarily enters into its space, but rather the point at which the two walls intersect. Starting at the geographic beginning of the Memorial (either of the two tips), one is actually starting part way through the list of names. The rows of names start on the top of the right hand wall (which is at the intersection of the two walls) and follow each other with merciless continuity panel by panel to the eastern tip of that wall (which points to the Washington Monument). The sequence resumes at the western tip, (which points to the Lincoln Memorial) and terminates at the bottom of the left-hand wall.

Thus the list both ends and begins at the center of the monument. Reading halfway through the list all the way to the eastern tip, one’s eyes are naturally drawn to the Washington Monument. The visitor who continues to read the names in the proper sequence would be forced to turn and walk to the other end of the Memorial to see the Lincoln Memorial. In other words, reading the names on the VVM is interrupted
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halfway through by the sight of the two other symbols. The monument invites the visitor to pause midway to consider the significance of the names in the light of memories of Washington and Lincoln. Moreover, in reading the names on the Memorial one is necessarily reading from west to east, from the traditional direction of death to that of resurrection and new life. However, one is forced to double back toward the west in order to finish reading the catalogue of names. The complexity of the monument’s directionality goes still deeper, for although the face of the VVM is directed to the south, the Memorial also resembles the tip of an arrow that is pointing north – the region long associated with darkness and mystery.¹²

The peculiar way in which the VVM begins and ends – specifically with the names of the first and last Americans to die in Vietnam – reminds one that the conflict had neither an official start (in sharp contrast, for example, to President Roosevelt’s statesman-like appeal for a declaration of war on Japan) nor an official end (there were few celebrations, few parades for the returning veterans, let alone on a national level). The disturbing inarticulateness of the Vietnam War that is in one sense embodied in the organization of the Memorial, is in another sense overcome by the VVM’s intricate symbolism and, indeed, simply by the existence of the Memorial on the Mall. One could argue that its very presence there bespeaks national recognition of and respect for the veterans’ service, and to that extent articulates a certain settling of accounts. And yet the matter is still more complex.

The list of names both ends and begins at the center of the monument, suggesting that the monument is both open and closed; open physically, at a very wide angle, like a weak “V” for “victory” (a “V” lying on its side, instead of with its arms pointing upward); but closed in substance – the war is over. This simultaneous openness and closure becomes all the more interesting when we realize that the VVM iconically represents a book. The pages are covered with writing, and the book is open partway through. The closure just mentioned is not that of the book but of a chapter in it. The openness indicates that further chapters have yet to be

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written, and read. It is important that the back of the monument is to the earth – against earth regarded by its owners as hallowed, as it lies at the symbolic center of the nation’s capital. The suggestion that the Vietnam War is but one chapter in the book of American history would be lost if the wall were above ground, backed by thin air. By inviting its viewers to understand the Vietnam War in this context, the VVM not only asks its spectators to remember that war, it admonishes them to write the next chapter thoughtfully and with reflection on the country’s values, symbols of which are pointed to by the Memorial itself.

And yet the lessons are deeply unclear, as the metaphor of the “book” suggests in spite of itself. A chronicle of proper names is not a narrative. A book of names, even organized in this brilliantly suggestive way, is a “book” only in name. What does this chapter mean? The Memorial deliberately leaves the answer underdetermined. We are offered just two short inscriptions, both written at the point where the two arms meet: one at the apex of the right-hand one, after the date “1959” (when the first American was killed), and the other on the bottom of the left-hand one, after the date “1975” (when the last American was killed). The first of these inscriptions reads

IN HONOR OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR. THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES AND OF THOSE WHO REMAIN MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THEY WERE TAKEN FROM US.

The second reads

OUR NATION HONORS THE COURAGE, SACRIFICE AND DEVOTION TO DUTY AND COUNTRY OF ITS VIETNAM VETERANS. THIS MEMORIAL WAS BUILT WITH PRIVATE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE. NOVEMBER 11, 1982.

Normally, war memorials honor those who died, not all those who fought, and normally they honor the cause as well. The point is emphasized even by the monument’s title: it is a memorial to the Vietnam veterans, not the Vietnam war. That it honors everyone who fought there without qualification suggests that they had not previously been honored by the American people. The Memorial seeks to bring about civic reconciliation by correcting the record and through public recognition. And it is clear not only from activities at the VVM but also from the many web sites, publications, and organizations, that the veterans and their families and
friends view it as their memorial, as a way of proclaiming and redeeming the honor of their service to country.\textsuperscript{13}

It should be obvious by now that there is nothing heroic about this memorial. It suggests honor without glory. The VVM is not inspiring in the usual way that memorials are. The focus throughout is on individuals. Even the appearance of a mechanical and impersonal order is avoided. Such an order would have arisen if the names were alphabetized or divided into categories according to the branches of the armed forces (the nearby monuments to the Second Division, Seabees, and Marines, by contrast, focus on one of the Armed Services). The chronology of the war is marked by the death of individuals. A visitor searching for a particular name is forced to “read” a number of other names, so paying attention once again to individuals.

It is true that the Memorial speaks first of all of loss and pain. As the Memorial’s architect pointed out, it is physically a gash in the earth, a scar only partially healed by the trees and the grass and the polish.\textsuperscript{14} The VVM is not a comforting memorial; it is perhaps because of this, rather than in spite of it, that it possesses remarkable therapeutic capacity. When people find on the VVM the name they have been looking for, they touch, even caress it, remembering. It is often followed by another: tracing the name on a piece of paper. Usually the names of individuals who die in a war are listed on a monument in their hometown. The VVM makes the loss of these individuals a matter of national concern. The result is a striking conversion of private grief and public display – a much noted commonplace at the Memorial. The designer of the Memorial wanted it to serve as an occasion for therapeutic catharsis, and in this she succeeded.\textsuperscript{15} For

\textsuperscript{13} A. Danto writes that “we erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget. . . . Memorials ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends.” But the continuation of the point about the difference between monuments and memorials does not hold of the VVM: “The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments we honor ourselves.” “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” \textit{The Nation} August 31, 1985, p. 152.

\textsuperscript{14} R. Campbell quotes Lin in “An Emotive Place Apart” as saying that “I thought about what death is, what a loss is. . . . A sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on the site. Take a knife and cut open the earth, and with time the grass would heal it. As if you cut open the rock and polished it.” \textit{American Institute of Architects Journal}, 72 (1983), p. 151.

\textsuperscript{15} Lin is quoted in \textit{U.S. News and World Report} (November 21, 1983, p. 68) as saying that she intended the memorial “to bring out in people the realization of loss and a cathartic healing process.” In her statement submitted as part of the design competition, Lin wrote: “Brought to a sharp awareness of such a loss, it is up to each individual to resolve
the visitor, sympathetic resonance with the display of another’s emotion is difficult to avoid. Momentarily joining strangers, publicizing private grief; these are among the modulations of civic association the VVM encourages.

By emphasizing the price paid by so many individuals, the VVM asks the onlooker to think about whether the sacrifice was worthwhile and whether it should be made again. It does not take a position as to the answers, but instead implies terrifying questions: Did these individuals die in vain? Was their death in keeping with the nation’s best traditions as symbolized by the nearby monuments? For what and when should fellow citizens die in war?

That the person contemplating the monument is implicated in these questions is also emphasized by the fact that its polished black granite functions as a mirror. One cannot help seeing oneself looking at the names, and on a bright day the reflections of the Washington or Lincoln Memorials as well. The dead and living thus meet, and the living are forced to ask whether those names should be on that wall, and whether others should die in similar causes. You are forced to wonder where you were then and what role you played in the war whether by commission or omission; or where you would be and what role you would play if a similar conflict were proposed or engaged. The character of the Memorial is in that respect interrogative.

[ii] RECONCILIATION WITHOUT APOLOGY?

The therapeutic and in that sense reconciliatory effect of the Memorial is inseparable from its interrogative character, and that in turn from its neutrality as to the justice of the war. Neutrality on that issue seems intended to make possible the non-neutral proclamation of the honor of the veterans’ service in Vietnam, and thus rejection of the suspicion that they acted shamefully by answering their country’s call. It would seem that veterans can reconcile their doubts about the conduct and even purposes of the war with their belief that their service was honorable, and non-veterans can retain the same doubts but also affirm the veterans’ sacrifice. Public or come to terms with this loss. For death is in the end a personal and private matter and the area contained within this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning” (from the “Design Competition: Winning Designer’s Statement,” reproduced by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Inc.). As A. Danto says in concluding “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial” (p. 155): “Be prepared to weep. Tears are the universal experience even if you don’t know any of the dead.”
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recognition of the sacrifice rights the wrong of the earlier official oblivion. This is a kind of personal, and civic, resolution of conflict.\textsuperscript{16} It is telling that contrary to loud warnings before the fact, the VVM has not become a rallying place for all sorts of “anti-American” groups. It has never been defaced. Nor has it become a rallying place for unreflective or unrestrained exhibitions of a country’s self-love. No declarations of war will be made within the arms of this memorial.

The VVM is not, then, therapeutic simply in a “psychological” way (though it is that as well). Its therapy depends on a notion of public recognition as valuable, as well as on the assertion of two specific values – honor in serving one’s country, and courage – the latter being the only virtue explicitly mentioned on the Memorial itself. But the striking success of its reconciliatory therapy also depends on its silences. No mention is made of the nearly three million Vietnamese killed in the war. The Memorial does not even hint that reconciliation with the nation’s former enemies is in order. The thought would immediately raise the question of the justice of the war, not to mention issues of recognition of the injury done, apology, and perhaps reparations. The sacrifice of those who refused to serve for principled reasons, and either went to prison or had to emigrate, is also unmentioned. Above all, the Memorial is silent as to the justification of the decision to go to war. The cost of the war to Americans is brilliantly and movingly recognized; and it is rationalized – insofar as it is rationalized here – by the fact of public recognition embodied in the VVM, and the assertions that the service was both honorable and courageous. The assumption seems to be that as a result, an apology to the veterans for expending life and limb is not due. Differently put, the question of political apology does not arise because the question of the justice of the war, and with it of responsibility for the war, is avoided. One is offered therapeutic reconciliation without apology, reconciliation without a stand on the questions of justice or responsibility (all without a recognition of the horrendous cost imposed on the other side). This

\textsuperscript{16} For a different interpretation, see W. Hubbard, “A Meaning for Monuments,” \textit{Public Interest}, 74 (1984): 17–30. Hubbard does not take into account the therapeutic effect of this memorial. His criticism of the VVM culminates in the following: “Little wonder, then, that the sheer emotional impact of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial satisfies us. Not having the idea that artworks can provide guidance in human dilemmas, we do not sense the absence of such guidance here. We take from the monument not a resolution of our conflicting emotions over the war, but an intensified, vivified version of those emotions” (p. 27). He assimilates the VVM to “modernist” architecture whose purpose is not to be \textit{about} something in the world so much as to \textit{be} a thing in the world (p. 26).
is therapeutic reconciliation built on a blend of truth, minimal assertion (in the form of the two inscriptions), an invitation to reflection, and deliberate silence – one might even say, evasion.

The difficulty with this approach to the problem of civic memory of conflict is, first, that it depends on the thesis that serving one’s country in war regardless of the cause is noble. And yet that is an unpersuasive thesis, as any standard counter-example suggests. The cause must be noble if service to it is noble. Secondly, the solution depends on the thesis that the virtues can be separated. It assumes that a claim to be courageous in a war coheres with a claim either to agnosticism about the war’s justice or the warranted judgment that the war is unjust. The “therapeutic” power of the VVM has actually depended on the stronger formulation of that proposition – that one can be courageous in the service of an unjust war. Many veterans, and certainly many non-veterans, must surely believe that the cause was not just (and not simply that the war was a failure for strategic reasons). The list of “errors” compiled by Robert McNamara and examined in the preceding chapter would provide ample support for this belief. But this version of the “separation of the virtues” thesis is not defensible. As Plato’s Socrates argues in the \textit{Laches} (192c–d), if courage is a virtue – and the VVM obviously assumes that it is – then it is conceptually dependent on being exercised for the sake of an end that is praiseworthy. Injustice does not meet that standard.\footnote{The point is not that the virtues are “one” in the sense that they are interdefinable (as though to define one virtue is to define them all), but that a person cannot be credited with one virtue while also being credited with the negation of another. I am also arguing here that a virtue such as courage is a “thick” concept in the sense that to call an act courageous is to endorse it.} Courage in the service of wrong is not a virtue, and thus no longer courage proper (it is more like endurance, strong will, and toughness). Would one call a child molester “courageous” in light of his persisting in his activities at great personal risk? “Hate the war, not the warrior” is ultimately no more defensible than St. Augustine’s “hate the sin, not the sinner.” Conversely, to support the warriors morally is to endorse the war they serve. If warriors cannot avoid the moral taint of a war in which they participated, then another context for apology arises, viz., what is due to those they injured.

Paradoxically, the VVM both invites reflection on the justifiability of the war and reconciles sentiments in such a way as to placate. Indeed, the rules governing the competition among proposed designs for the memorial required that it not take a “political” stand. The result is an unstable compromise, a half remembering and half forgetting, a nagging
question and a proud reassurance of honor and courage. Because it attempts reconciliation without either political apology or the denial that any apology is in order, it necessarily sidesteps essential questions. In so doing, it embodies and encourages a national decision to forget them. These are, to repeat, the questions as to whether the war was just in conception and in execution; whether the warriors (and non-warriors as well) are absolved of moral responsibility; and whether or not apology is due on several fronts. My skepticism about the theses that service to one’s country in time of war is in and of itself honorable no matter what the war, and that courage can serve injustice, bears on all three of these questions. Even a proponent of the war who thought the cause altogether just must admit that the execution was incompetent, at monumental cost, and if only on those grounds must raise the question of apology.

The unfortunate result of the silences in the official narrative is that these fundamental issues remain unresolved and ever more difficult to raise publicly, especially for a “public figure,” especially in a democracy. This is always the result of habituation to silence about essentials. But in the long run, a nation – particularly a democratic one – cannot afford to pass over in uncomfortable silence matters of such grave importance. These are precisely the sorts of hard issues that ought to be addressed through common deliberation. The avoidance of the question of apology in a people’s official narrative is the avoidance of full and public discussion of truth and responsibility. The “politically impossible” is politically indispensable, and Santayana’s famous line, quoted at the start of this chapter, challenges anyone who denies it. To be sure, taken by itself that line is misleading: for one could remember perfectly and yet wish to repeat the past. One could remember in order to celebrate evil, or to keep resentment and revenge alive. Remembering is not a panacea, but must be accompanied by defensible interpretation and assessment. But forgetting is the path to ignorant repetition, and remembering is a necessary condition of living both wisely and in light of the truth. It may be objected that the truth is in dispute. But then why not determine it by means of a truth commission, or a well-structured dialogue about the moral fundamentals? Without honest assessment of the past, no memory worth having; without honest memory, no present worth living; without apology for injuries done, no future worth hoping for. The errors of the dead and dying repeat themselves, and with them the conflict and moral hatred they engender. This is the nightmare of self-perpetuating violence and revenge that forgiveness and political apology seek to address in their respective spheres.
Civic reconciliation premised on so compromised a moral basis as that reflected by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is, unfortunately, as brittle as it is unlikely to help the next generation avoid earlier mistakes. The ideals of accountability, responsibility, trustworthiness, self-governance according to justifiable shared norms, the replacement of revenge by due justice, the obligation of the powerful to respect those over whom they rule, and the indispensability of both truth and its public statement—these guide the narrative of political apology. They cannot be ignored or replaced without moral and practical hazard. Consequently, due political apology ought not be evaded. Particularly when the powerful—whether one or many—apologize when apology is due, the earlier flawed civic narrative cannot simply be cited and re-lived, unless amnesia rules the realm. There is no guarantee that the next chapter will be better written when guided by these ideals. But it is certain that it will not be better written if it is blind to them.