

# What Do We Remember When We Remember War?

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Why do we build war memorials, Kyle Henry asks in his short documentary film *Half-Life of War*, and who do we build them for? Do we build them to remember or to forget? Do we build them to honor the fallen and remember their sacrifice? Or do we build them to comfort the living and to assuage our guilt for causing such sacrifice? Do we build them to reflect on war's realities or to blind ourselves to those realities? If they are meant to prompt reflection why do we so often seem not to notice them? Did the war dead die to go unnoticed?

Uneasy with the quotidian obscurity fated for all war memorials, Henry seeks to focus our attention on these markers and to reinscribe them with war's violence by moving from tranquil but overlooked memorials to forlorn national cemeteries as his film progresses, punctuating close-ups of grave markers with syncopated gun shots before his camera comes to rest on a fresh grave in the film's closing moments. It is one of the 1.5 million graves of dead soldiers that checker the American landscape, along with the 218,000 American war dead buried and memorialized overseas.

With the United States at war almost constantly since 1941 there is no shortage of wars to remember, and no want of war dead to memorialize. Yet, oddly, the more ubiquitous war becomes, the more difficult it is to see clearly, or to see at all. And the more war memorials we build, the less likely we are to notice them. *Half-Life of War* seeks to refocus our attention on these mementos and to revivify them with political and moral force.

The first American national cemetery was constructed at Gettysburg in October 1863. One month later, President Abraham Lincoln marked the occasion with the Gettysburg Address. Standing in the "Soldiers' National Cemetery" as the recovery and reburial of the dead continued around him, Lincoln called on the memory of "these honored dead" to found "a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Lincoln's words "remade America," as historian Garry Wills has put it. By linking wartime blood sacrifice to national rebirth, Lincoln sacralized the war dead and the nation for which they fought, putting soldier sacrifice at the center of the national story just as Christ's sacrifice lies at the heart of the nation's dominant Christian faith. Both promised eternal life after death, with the war dead living on in the memory of the nation they had died to redeem.

The power of Lincoln's brief Gettysburg oration never diminished. The memorial traditions depicted in the *Half-Life of War* sprang from that moment, with national cemeteries becoming ubiquitous in the United States and throughout the world after that moment. Until Gettysburg the ordinary soldier dead were typically abandoned

to oblivion wherever they fell. Reburial at state expense was reserved for high-born officers and local boys killed close to home, while war memorials featured general officers on horseback, not common soldiers on foot. After the Revolutionary War, for instance, 11,000 Americans who perished aboard British prison ships laid unburied in Brooklyn with, "skulls and feet, arms and legs, sticking out of the crumbling bank in the wildest disorder," as one contemporary put it, until they were finally entombed in 1808, twenty-five years after their deaths. All that changed with the Civil War, which ushered in the national cemetery and the common soldier war memorial, memorial innovations meant to recognize and instill the new democratic nationalism that emerged from that cataclysm.

To this day one can find the wartime sacrifices of the common soldier venerated on the National Mall, where the Gettysburg Address is inscribed in white marble at the Lincoln Memorial, where the names of every American killed in Vietnam are engraved on the black granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and where a star at the World War II memorial marks every 100 Americans killed in that conflict. Across the Potomac, 400,000 soldiers and their wives lay buried at Arlington National Cemetery. As *Half-Life of War* illustrates, since the Civil War memorials to the American war dead have been built in communities and crossroads across the country.

Yet despite or because of their pervasiveness, war memorials largely go unnoticed, especially in our everyday lives. The reasons for this are complicated and don't necessarily prove disinterest on the part of the public. The things we value most are often honored more in the breach than in the observance, and it is undeniable that the selfless sacrifice of the ordinary American soldier remains one of the most sacrosanct ideals in American public life, thus the compulsion to "support the troops" no matter what, even when those troops might best be served by more critical speech and less lip service. The inexorable passage of time also takes its toll. Every war has a memorial half-life that it reaches roughly fifty-years from its end as its veterans age and die before receding from living memory and into history books.

But it does seem to me that there is something more at work than time's passage in our current inattention to war, something more deliberate, something closer to war-weariness and battle fatigue. After fourteen years of uninterrupted war the very longevity and boundlessness of the "war on terror" poses problems for would-be memorialists—what wars are we talking about and where? What should we call them? How to distinguish them? When should we begin and end? Americans are accustomed to thinking of war as a discrete event in a particular time and space, but the war on terror seems to defy any easy boundaries. And who are the victims of these wars and how should they be remembered? Americans no longer die in large numbers in the wars we fight, but growing percentages do suffer life-long trauma, much of it invisible to non-veterans. Is it still appropriate to honor their sacrifice solely by honoring the war dead? Finally, in contrast to much of American history, veterans can no longer be assumed to represent the nation—the All-Volunteer Force is too distinctive for such an equation, coming as it does disproportionately from white micropolitan communities that are politically and sociologically distinct from most of the United States. In many respects the National September 11 Memorial

and Museum offers Americans a way to remember the war on terror that is more familiar to them, and far more flattering to their self-image, than anything they could build to the servicemen and servicewomen who fought in the troubled wars that followed.

One senses that discomfort with war's omnipresence in recent decades is somehow related to the disinterest in war memorials that *Half-Life of War* documents. Whether this means the reverse—that calling our attention to war memorials and the deaths they mark will further discomfit a nation enamored of war—is hard to say. Some might hope that the gunshots that reverberate in Kyle Henry's film might jolt viewers into pained recognition of war's costs, which it puts on vivid display. But I would contend that so long as Americans persist in representing themselves as the sole or primary victims of the wars that they wage and so long as they believe that war preserves rather than threatens democracy, they will continue to wage war too readily and too often, resulting in still more war memorials.

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