

Monuments of Civil Religion

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INTRODUCTION: LAND OF THE PILGRIMS’ PRIDE, LAND WHERE MY FATHERS DIED

There was never really a question that Ground Zero would receive some kind of memorial. Less than six months after September 11, 2001, New York Governor George Pataki, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation announced the building of an interim site. By April, 2003, a selection jury for a permanent memorial had been formed, and general guidelines were publicized for anyone wishing to submit a concept. These included “convey[ing] the magnitude of personal and physical loss at this location,” “evok[ing] the historical significance of the worldwide impact of September 11, 2001,” and “creat[ing] an original and powerful statement of enduring and universal symbolism” (Lower Manhattan Development Corporation: 19). In January of the following year the jury announced “Reflecting Absence,” designed by architects Michael Arad and Peter Walker, as the winner. Now known as the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, it is laid out like a park, complete with paths and swamp white elms, designed to allow visitors to take in the sheer absence of the Twin Towers that once stood here. The only reminders of their former existence are two, one-acre, granite-lined reflecting pools where the foundations of the skyscrapers once stood. These are continuously replenished by water, which runs down their sides in gentle cascades. Etched into

the stone barriers that surround them are the names of those who perished here in the September 11 attacks. The space is clean and relatively unadorned, allowing visitors to develop their own relationships both to the site and to the historical event that it marks.

Construction on the memorial began in March of 2006, and is now nearing its completion. The National September 11 Memorial and Museum will soon become a very important addition to the vast array of statues, obelisks, historic sites, monuments, heritage sites and national parks commemorating the individuals and events that have shaped America’s destiny. At least as long as eyewitnesses are alive to remember them, the attacks of September 11 will loom large in the nation's memory as life-changing events, both for individuals and for the public as a whole. For this reason alone, New York has deemed it fit to set aside more than four acres of premium Manhattan real estate for the purposes of commemoration. In Judaism, the Hebrew word translated into English as “holy,” *quadosh*, also means “set aside” or “distinct.” But beyond this linguistic turn, does the setting aside of the former site of the World Trade Center—or Civil War battlefields, or military cemeteries, or the sculpted likenesses of former military and political leaders—warrant their designation as “religious” places?

At first glance, there would seem to be countless precedents in world religions for making comparisons between the sacred places of religion and sacred national sites like the National September 11 Memorial and Museum. Certainly there are countless examples in world religions for setting aside certain public spaces for remembrance in perpetuity. One thinks, for example, of the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya, where Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment to become the Buddha, or perhaps of the Via Dolorosa, the road in Jerusalem along which Jesus carried his

cross on the way to Golgotha. In fact, by definition, every place of religious pilgrimage is a place set aside and designated for memorializing. But it is misleading to equate the notions of memory in religious and modern national contexts. The National September 11 Memorial and Museum reflects a radical departure not only from traditional religious strategies of memorializing, but even from older methods of preserving memory in the American national context.

The novelty of national monuments and memorials can easily be glossed over in scholarly discussions of American “civil religion.” This latter concept originally appeared in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762), but was reanimated within religious studies by sociologist Robert Bellah in his 1967 essay, “Civil religion in America.” Bellah referred to a “collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity [namely, the American nation-state]” (Bellah 1967: 8). Drawing examples from a number of presidential speeches, Bellah suggested that “behind the [American] civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth” (Bellah 1967: 18). Inspired by these insights, a number of scholars in the field of American religion subsequently documented the very real influence of colonial Puritan theology on the early formation of America's national mythology.

Notwithstanding the conclusions of this scholarship, however, religious and national notions of memorial space remain quite distinct. In order to show why this is so, in the following pages I will discuss a pre-national commemorative ritual, the New England Puritan observance of the Sabbath in the public meetinghouse, highlighting the distinctive conceptions of space, time, and community that it reflects. I will continue by presenting an overview of the strategies that Anglo-

Europeans used to memorialize the nation from the time of the Revolution until the early-twentieth century, clarifying the important differences between civil religion and its religious antecedents. Focusing on the development of Washington, D.C. as the symbolic center of the United States, we will see that national monuments failed to evoke a sense of American unity until the construction in 1901 of the National Mall, a space reflecting new understandings of space, time, and community that contrasted with those of pre-modern religions. Finally, in the concluding section of the essay I will return to the latest instantiation of memorializing in the United States, in which the September 11 Memorial and Museum derives its meaning.

This new era, inaugurated in 1982 by Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, represents an even further departure from religious strategies of memorializing in its rejection of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century monuments. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was built neither to glorify “great men who make history” nor to celebrate the nation as an abstract collective. Lin designed the memorial as an “anti-monument,” geared towards evoking highly personal experiences and interactions with the space, and intended to heal the nation rather than to glorify it.¹ Although I will use the terms “memorial” and “monument” interchangeably throughout this essay, architects, artists, and planners following in Lin’s footsteps have increasingly kept these terms quite distinct. In current parlance, a memorial signifies a physical site or artifact designed to bring participants into a highly individualized and experiential relationship with the imagined community of the nation, while a monument signifies those earlier places and spaces intended to symbolize a consensual and “official” version of national history (Doss 2010: 38).

“Reflecting Absence” incorporates many of concepts pioneered by Lin, who was in fact a member of the 13-person jury that chose Arad’s and Parker’s memorial to commemorate the September 11 attacks. As one scholar has observed, the emphasis on individual emotional experience reflected in America’s latest kind of memorials echoes the sensibilities of nineteenth-century republicans who tried in vain to prevent the building of national monuments altogether. Paradoxically, however, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial seems to have set in motion a new wave of memorializing that Erika Doss has characterized as “memorial mania.” The plethora of memorials now rising up throughout the American landscape in many ways represent the antithesis of Bellah’s notion of a single, unified civil religion, although it is questionable whether or not there ever was any “religious” dimension—civil or otherwise—to national monuments in America before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

FROM PURITAN TO NATIONAL MEMORY

The New England Puritans are the customary starting point for most discussions of American civil religion in its various manifestations, as most of the nation’s mythology derives from their self-understanding as a people set apart from the rest of the world, and chosen to complete a divine mission during the last days of salvation history (see Bloch 1985; Mead 1977; Richley and Jones 1974). The Puritans understood the events of both the Old and New Testaments as foreshadowing their own migration to America. As the Israelites had escaped from bondage in Egypt, wandered for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai, and eventually arrived in Israel to build a society in accordance with the Laws that God had revealed to Moses, so too did Puritans see themselves as having broken free of England’s religiously corrupt society, and as restoring

the primitive church in the “wilderness” of New England. As Robert Bellah made explicit, American political history is replete with speeches invoking these and other biblical tropes. The United States is thus rendered the modern institutional heir of Puritan mythology. From the time of the Revolution until today, Americans have perennially proclaimed their ostensibly secular nation to be a community set apart from the rest of the world, and destined to carry out a divine mission during the last days of human history.

There are fundamental differences, however, between invoking Puritan mythology in the modern context (either the political or the scholarly one), and the former acts of remembrance in the seventeenth-century colonial context. If and when *we* remember the Puritans, we imaginatively envision them as existing “in time”; and if and when we mythologize the Puritans as America’s sacred ancestors, we remember them as prototypes or models for whatever present-time national decisions or actions we wish to valorize. But when the Puritans wished to evoke memories of the past for their own purposes, it was not simply time and precedent that they were recalling. Rather, they were evoking the laws and events related in God’s Word, which was understood to be articulating truths that exist outside of time altogether. Historian of religion Mircea Eliade referred to the actions recounted in religious myths as unfolding *in illo tempore*—“in that time,” an eternal realm imagined completely outside or before human time (Eliade 1954: 3-5). In the Puritan understanding of scripture, biblical tales of ancient Israel and the early church transpired within an overarching mythos that was the same in their day as it was thousands of years earlier. As far as they were concerned, not everything under the sun was new.

Eliade also noted that pre-modern societies routinely commemorated sacred stories at special places understood to be thresholds between Heaven and Earth, or eternity and time, which he termed *axes mundi* (singular: *axis mundi*), or “centers of the cosmos” (Eliade 1954: 12-17). Indeed for the Puritans, any place in New England could become an *axis mundi* if God’s providential hand was discerned in the events unfolding there. Wars waged with Indians, unsuccessful harvests, successful harvests, and the safe arrival of ships are just a few of the more common examples of events that spurred Puritans to pray for or rejoice in the intervention of a wrathful but forgiving God who watched over the founding of a Protestant theocracy in the biblical wilderness of Massachusetts, just as He had led the ancient Israelites, and guided the apostles of Jesus.

Within this general understanding of New England as the American Holy Land, the Puritan meetinghouse was regularly set apart as a particularly sacred place. Unlike most other places of worship, the meetinghouse served as a secular as well as a religious building—with heads of wolves killed for bounty hanging from its exterior walls, and barrels of gunpowder stored inside (see Fischer 1989: 117-125). Nevertheless, the meetinghouse was also where the Word of God came alive—in sermons delivered during spontaneous days of thanksgiving and public humiliation, or routinely during weekly Sunday observances of the Sabbath. On the one hand, Puritans followed in the footsteps of other Protestants in denouncing the sundry *axes mundi* of the English and Continental countryside—places such as holy wells, saints’ shrines, monasteries and even churches—as so many legacies of Catholic “pagano-papism.” The consecration of these sites was an affront to Christian faith, so they reasoned, because human beings could neither limit nor control God’s sovereign power. On the other hand, as soon as English Puritans

had migrated to New England, they proceeded to build their townships according to the time-honored custom of setting aside a sacred center in the middle of their settlements—the meetinghouse—around which all other buildings and cultivated lands were organized. Reviewing the conceptions of town planning that guided this practice, Belden C. Lane has summarized:

[The] paradigmatic townscape [of Puritan New England consisted] of six concentric circles set within a six-mile square. Optimally every Puritan village would be laid out in this manner. At the innermost circle would be the meetinghouse where the faithful gathered regularly to worship. As towers and spires were added to the simple New England churches after 1699, this symbolism of the church as ancient roland or *axis mundi* would be enhanced even further. In the second concentric circle, surrounding the meeting house on its village green, were the houses of the congregation members, “orderly placed to enjoy comfortable communion.” This proximity to the house of meeting and to each other was considered crucially important on both social and theological grounds. Reverence for communal authority and respect for the Body of Christ could be nourished, it was thought, only by physical closeness to the symbolic center of God’s rule. (Lane 2002: 140)

Beyond these two circles the Puritans concentrically arranged a ring of common fields, a circle of larger lots for “men of great estate,” a ring of free-standing farms for the public food supply, and finally an outer ring of “swamps and rubbish waste grounds” demarcating the boundary between cosmos and chaos (Lane 2002: 140-141). Lane draws attention to "the hierarchical and

centripetal notion of space that characterized the early New England mind,” which in turn reflected the implicit theological notion of space as organized around an *axis mundi* (Lane 2002: 138).

In their strict observance of the Sabbath, the Puritans broke once again from continental Reformers' condemnation of religious ceremonialism. In their explications of Christian doctrine, both Martin Luther and John Calvin had qualified the meaning of the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue to “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Luther taught that the new covenant had set Christians free from what he saw as the ritualism of Jewish Law; he recommended Sunday observance as a sound Christian practice, but also taught that no particular day of the week was more sacred than any other. In Calvin’s more conservative interpretation of the Fourth Commandment, Christians were required to set aside Sunday as their Sabbath “to hear the word of God, to celebrate the sacraments, and engage in the regular prayers” (Calvin 1545). But Calvin also took pains to clarify that the sanctity of the day derived from the piety of its observers, rather than its inscription in any ritual calendar.

As the theological heirs of Calvin, English Puritans were appalled by what they saw as a lapse of piety regarding the observance of the Lord’s Day among Anglicans, and called for its strict enforcement as part of their ecclesiastical reforms. Quite unlike either Luther or Calvin, however, Puritans came to understand the weekly structuring of time into six days of labor and one of rest as reflecting the cosmic structure of time, as it came to be *in illo tempore* recounted in biblical Creation myths. The “Westminster Confession of Faith,” a seventeenth-century summary of principles upheld by England's Calvinist dissenters, made the point explicit:

As it is of the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him; *which, from the beginning of the world* to the Resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and from the Resurrection of Christ was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath. (“Westminster Confession” 1646, chapter 21, paragraph 7, emphasis added)

English Puritans brought this understanding of the Sabbath with them to New England, observing the Lord’s Day much like Jews observed Shabbat. From sundown on Saturday through sundown on Sunday, they abstained from all work whatsoever—making exceptions only for acts of necessity and charity—subordinating ordinary to cosmic time. Despite the Puritans’ denouncement of Catholic ritual, the entire performance reflected a powerful, though unconscious, continuation of Medieval Christian practice.

It is important to recall also that the Puritans did not distinguish between sacred and secular political authority. John Winthrop’s famous image of New England as the “City Upon a Hill” referred to the ideal of a Protestant theocracy in which individuals were expected to prioritize the welfare of the community, understood as the “body of Christ,” through various acts of Christian charity. Their conception of political community, no less than their notion of space, was a centripetal and therefore hierarchical one—notwithstanding their proto-democratic vision of the

church as a “priesthood of all believers.” In their role as preachers, Puritan ministers stood at the religious and social center of society as the “ambassadors of Christ,” living thresholds between eternity and time.

While it remains true that the founders of the United States borrowed mythic themes from Puritan sermons and literature, their understandings of space, time, and community were fundamentally different from those of their colonial predecessors. In *Sons of the Fathers: the Civil Religion of the American Revolution*, historian of religion Catherine L. Albanese has provided an illuminating account of the first Revolutionary memorials in the “liberty trees” around which patriots spontaneously gathered as they broke away from the English Crown (Albanese 1976: 46-80). On August 14, 1765, a few protestors against the recent Stamp Act hung two effigies, one of the stamp master and another of his assistant, from the limbs of the first liberty tree in Boston. Later in the day, it was cut down and carried in a procession, followed by crowds of people shouting “liberty and property forever, no stamps” (Ramsay 1811: i, 89). As news of the protest spread, other New England towns quickly followed suit, setting aside their own liberty trees, or in some cases liberty poles, as symbolic rallying points for the new revolutionary society. The British were quick to notice the ritual significance of the trees, taking care to raze and burn them in attacks against the patriots. The decoration of liberty trees continued as a political ritual for several decades after the American Revolution. Supporters of Andrew Jackson, for example, erected hickory poles on the eve of the presidential election to celebrate their candidates’ republican ideals (Albanese 1976: 66).

But the religious symbolism of the liberty trees was ambiguous. Albanese notes that, to a partial extent, they resembled the sacred trees found throughout the world’s religions connecting the Earth to Heaven. Quite unlike *axes mundi*, however, the liberty trees were “self-conscious, historicized symbols,” marking the humanocentric orientation of America’s fledgling nationalism (Albanese 1976: 59). What the original liberty trees marked off as “sacred” were the awe-inspiring events of revolutionary society—not the ahistorical events *in illo tempore* of the Bible. Despite their naturally occurring verticality, the liberty trees were more like mirrors, figuratively reflecting the early modern American collective back to itself.

The humanocentric orientation of American nationalism reflected a constellation of Enlightenment assumptions about the structure of ultimate reality. The notion of “empty and homogenous” time—in which the events of human history supposedly unfold in linear succession—had by the late 1700s come to eclipse the concept of archetypal time in large part embraced by the Puritans.² Relatedly, the Revolutionaries imagined the American landscape as consecrated only to the extent that the deeds of “great men” set it apart as noteworthy, and in this belief they turned away from the older organization of space around an *axis mundi*. The very ideal of democracy, furthermore, came to replace the centripetal and hierarchical social vision of the New England Puritans. Notwithstanding this modern orientation, however, revivalist ministers of the First Great Awakening had provided eighteenth-century Americans with a new theological language through which they could still relate the Revolution to biblical events. Evangelical Calvinists understood themselves as “making history” in response to the guiding hand of Providence, and they celebrated the new democratic *polis* as a social order that made manifest God’s will—even if it did not quite reflect a celestial archetype. Summarizing the civil

religion of the American Revolution, Albanese concludes that it “‘flatten[ed]’ transcendence without obliterating it”—investing human acts and deeds with a mythic significance of their own, while appropriating Calvinist themes within a modern context (Albanese 1976: 18).

CONSECRATING NATIONAL SPACE

The problematic task of creating a political center that could symbolize the entire nation fell to the immediate heirs of the Revolution. In 1791, a year after Congress approved the construction of the federal capital along the banks of the Potomac River, George Washington appointed the French-born architect and engineer Pierre (Peter) Charles L’Enfant to design plans for the new city of Washington, DC. L’Enfant’s master plan proposed building a constellation of politically symbolic sites throughout the city. These included a house for the president and the Congress—today’s White House and Capitol building, respectively—as well as a series of “statues, columns, and obelisks” commemorating Revolutionary heroes remembered in each state (Savage 2005: 30). Based on a modification of these plans, construction of the capital began in 1792. The President’s house was completed in 1800, and the Congress house in 1811, but it would not be until after the Civil War that anything close to a city resembling today’s Washington—a veritable city of monuments and memorials—would come into being. Well into the nineteenth century most of the capital city languished as an undeveloped badland, with its local economy largely dependent on the trading of slaves.

Throughout the antebellum period, two conceptual obstacles stood in the way of building a capital capable of memorializing the American nation as a whole. Planners of Washington, DC,

continued to conceptualize the city in pre-modern terms, as the centripetal hub symbolically consolidating power into a single center. Federalists advocating a strong national government invariably supported this vision, while Republicans, who triumphed a loosely knit confederation of states, opposed it. The partisan disagreement over urban planning came to a head over a Federalist proposal to inter George Washington’s body underneath the rotunda of the Capitol building. If Republicans had begrudgingly conceded to L’Enfant’s original plan to memorialize Washington with an equestrian statue, they recoiled from the idea of moving his remains from Mount Vernon to an elaborate crypt in the house of Congress. The suggestion stirred up associations with monarchy; as far as they were concerned, the move would elevate George Washington to the status of divine king, undermining the principles of democracy for which the Revolution was fought. In the first public debates over the meaning of American memorials, Republicans countered that the most effective and democratically appropriate way to remember George Washington was to immortalize his character through the teaching of American history, a task more suited for books than for monuments.

The controversy ended in a stalemate. The idea for the crypt passed the House but not the Senate and, because of a lack of funds, the equestrian statue was never built. Neither the centripetal notion of symbolic space advocated by the Federalists, nor the diffusionist image advanced by the Republicans, adequately symbolized the paradox of *e pluribus unum*—“one out of many”—that constituted the United States as a political entity. In hindsight, the deadlock reflected a more fundamental obstacle to nation-building than either party could articulate at the time. In fact, it stemmed from a technological rather than a political impasse. It would not be until the completion of America’s five transcontinental railroads in 1883 that at least some of America’s

citizens could experience the new republic *kinesthetically*.³ Viewing the political territory of America while hurtling at high speeds along the rails was an unprecedented and *lived* experience of the country as a unified and transcendent space, one that encompassed both cultural and geographical diversity. It was also the foundation upon which Americans began to articulate a distinctively modern form of civil religion.

Riding the rails was, first, an opportunity to visit a number of stunning natural locales out West—places like today’s Glacier or Yellowstone Parks in Montana and Wyoming—that railroad companies deliberately showcased as both “wonders” of Nature and icons of the nation. The idealization of Nature as the ontological bedrock on the United States already had ample precedents in both eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy and mid-nineteenth century Romantic arts and literature (see Hughes 2004: especially 45-66). It was now left to the railroad corporations to fashion themselves as the escorts into the sublime—though not supernatural—“essence” of America, through both advertising and the scripting of guidebooks to various stops along their lines. Railroad travel thus became the secular analog to religious pilgrimage, with marvelous natural destinations filling in for the traditional *axes mundi* defining older pilgrimage routes (Shaffer 2001: 40-92).

Within a few decades, the federal government had realized the economic and cultural power of these ideas, and began working with the railroads to transform American tourism into a national rite of passage. In 1916, Woodrow Wilson created the National Park Service “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment

of future generations” (*National Park Service Organic Act*). The National Park Service subsequently became the custodial agency overseeing most of the nation's monuments, historic as well as natural, and continues to function in this capacity today.

The inclusion of cultural sites to compliment national monuments paralleled further developments in transportation technology. The first mass-produced automobile, the Model T Ford, appeared in 1908, and for the next two decades advocates for a national system of roadways built on the boosterism of railroad companies, advertising the plethora of historic and cultural sites that awaited the patriotic motorist. In the 1930s and '40s, the Federal Writers' Project, one of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs, published the “American Guide” series, a collection of books and pamphlets cataloging the historic attractions along America's roadways—including Indian ruins, technological artifacts, and homes of illustrious Americans—for each state. The series narrated these places as milestones in the nation's history of “progress,” conceptualized as the country's ongoing domination of its natural environment. It also celebrated the local folklore and folkways of each state as reflecting America's unique and indigenous culture (Shaffer 2001: 186-202).

The physical act of touring through national space shaped the course of development in Washington, DC, in ways that early planners literally could not have imagined. Most prosaically, the development of a transportation infrastructure facilitated travel to the capital, which in the wake of widespread tourism could no longer claim to be the sole symbolic “center” of America. But more substantively, tourism provided Washington with a new way of conceptualizing and showcasing national memory. Throughout the nineteenth century the city had proceeded in fits

and starts to memorialize American history. Some three decades after Federalists and Republicans first battled over the *raison d’être* of national memory, Congress finally commissioned an artist, Horatio Greenbrough, to sculpt a statue of George Washington. In 1841, Greenbrough’s piece was installed outside the Capitol, not far from the site where the crypt had been proposed. Featuring Washington as the Roman god Jupiter, seated half-naked on a throne, the statue became a national laughing-stock, and was removed after just two years. Following this debacle, Congress settled mostly on the planting of memorial trees, and the installation of equestrian-style statues commemorating select military heroes at a number of sites throughout the city, just as L’Enfant has originally envisioned. At least as far as the public was concerned, the results were pleasing enough. With its network of gardens and public art, Washington, DC, became the most popular tourist destination for newlyweds by the 1880s (Savage 2005: 95). And yet, it still lacked a single monumental center reflecting an iconic power comparable to that of its natural landscape.

With the plan to build the National Mall, unveiled in 1901, Washington, DC, came into its own as a memorial hub of the nation. The proposed design of the Mall—as an open, rectangular area of elm-tree-lined fields, extending approximately three miles along an east-west axis from the Capitol building to the newly planned Lincoln Memorial—took its architectural inspiration from an earlier monument to George Washington, conceived after the removal of Greenbrough’s statue. In 1845, a private association of citizens had successfully proposed to Congress the idea of building a 555-foot-tall obelisk, the Washington Monument, to commemorate America’s mythic founder. For its time, the concept was a radical one, not only for the scale of the project—which took over four decades to construct—but also for its design. According to the

architectural protocol of the day, great men were commemorated with statues, while obelisks functioned as place markers, most commonly of Revolutionary battlefields. Memorializing George Washington with an obelisk—built, no less, at a site that lacked any historical relevance to the Revolution—succeeded in breaking the old Federalist-Republican deadlock, only to leave observers puzzling over its symbolic significance. Following its completion in 1884, city planners and landscape architects struggled for nearly twenty years to incorporate the Washington Monument into the overall memorial landscape of the capital, failing to agree on a solution.

Then came the idea to build the National Mall *around* the Washington Monument—not simply as an embellishment, but as an iconic space in which the obelisk would stand (Savage 2005: 162-166). Conceptualized during the heyday of patriotic tourism, the Mall was a symbolic compression of the expansive nation as travelers along the transcontinental railroads were then experiencing it. It evoked an experience of Nature’s Nation stretching unbroken from “from sea to shining sea.” The Mall gave meaning, retroactively, to the abstract design of the Washington Monument. From the perspective of the twentieth century, memorializing George Washington as an embodied figure—as either military hero or moral exemplar—would have been to limit the greatness of his legacy. The marvels of technology had made it abundantly clear that modern America quite literally transcended the limitations of physicality by overcoming them. The National Mall, with the Washington Monument near its center, highlighted the imminent splendor of what the nation had become since the days of the Revolution.

The basic structure of today’s Mall came to completion in 1922, with the formal dedication of the Lincoln Memorial. Located on the western terminus of the Mall, the monument commemorated Abraham Lincoln not simply as a historical figure, but also symbolically as America’s “second founding father.” To a certain extent, the Lincoln Memorial was in keeping with the architectural customs of its day: Lincoln as a “great man” was memorialized by a statue of his likeness, enshrined within a Greek-Doric-style temple. Beyond this formality, however, the Memorial reflected its own break with cultural precedent. First, Lincoln’s *words* were commemorated as part of the monument: the text of the Gettysburg Address was inscribed on the walls of one interior chamber; that of his Second Inaugural Address in another. The inclusion of these speeches went beyond the mere commemoration of an individual man to underscore the transcendent dimension of the national ideals articulated in his orations. Second, the towering statue of the seated president, with brow furrowed and fingers clenched, evoked the pathos of the Civil War and, by extension, the gravity of the personal sacrifices for which all wars in defense of the nation call. This was a far cry from the triumphal celebration of military heroism reflected in the extant statues of the day.

The Lincoln Memorial does not represent, of course, the first attempt in America to commemorate warfare. On the contrary, war memorials of a more explicit nature have figured as a perennial feature of the national monumental landscape since the early nineteenth century. In commemorating and sanctifying the ultimate sacrifice that citizens undergo for their nation, they come closest to traditional religious monuments—analogue to temples of human sacrifice dedicated to the gods, or shrines built to house the holy remains of martyrs. In his classic discussion of modern nationalism, Benedict Anderson notes that nations, like the religious

communities that preceded them, offer their members an ultimate meaning to contingency, suffering, and death. “It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny,” he writes (Anderson 2006: 12), and nowhere more clearly do we see this symbolic transformation enacted than in modern monuments to warfare. A singular difference between religious and national sacrifice relates again, however, to their distinctive notions of time and space. In a traditionally religious context, sacrifice is believed to effect an alchemical transformation of the temporal body into an eternal one; the physical remains of sacrificial victims are charged with sacred power, while their spirits, it is believed, go on to dwell eternally with the gods or God. In the modern context, however, it is the act of sacrifice itself that is venerated; by continually laying down their lives for the country, citizens assure the perpetuation of their nation's existence into the indefinite future.

Throughout the antebellum period monuments to war most commonly took the form of statues to military leaders, as in Horatio Greenbrough's rendition of George Washington as the sword-wielding Jupiter. Thousands of such statues, erected in cities and towns throughout the nation up until the twentieth century, were intended to instill the values of patriotic honor, loyalty, and duty in their onlookers. Also during the antebellum period, citizens memorialized a number of Revolutionary battlefields, erecting obelisks where American blood had been shed. A number of ancient civilizations, including Egypt and Rome, once built obelisks as *axes mundi*, orienting their societies to the timeless realm of the gods. In the modern American context, however, citizens appropriated them to evoke a sense of the timelessness and permanence of democratic ideals. In 1825, Daniel Webster delivered a speech at the laying-of-the-cornerstone ceremony for

the Bunker Hill Monument in Boston that captures the secular meaning of national sacrifice in the early decades after the Revolution. Webster began by reminding his contemporaries:

We are among the sepulchers of our fathers. We are on ground distinguished by their valor, their constancy, and the shedding of their blood. We are here, not to fix an uncertain date in our annals, nor to draw into notice an obscure and unknown spot. If our humble purpose had never been conceived, if we ourselves had never been born, the 17th of June, 1775, would have been a day on which all subsequent history would have poured its light, and the eminence where we stand, a point of attraction to the eyes of successive generations. (Webster 1825)

Striking here is the absence of any language invoking God or explicitly biblical imagery. The ground is “distinguished” but not holy; it has *become* eminent and worthy of attraction due to the marvelous deeds of America’s Revolutionary forebears enacted in ordinary time. For this historic rather than divine reason, a 221-foot obelisk made of granite was raised to mark the Battle of Bunker Hill, becoming the inspiration for the even taller—and equally secular—Washington Monument.

After the Civil War, new military leaders joined the ranks of America's wartime heroes, while hundreds of new battlefields were added to the national landscape, mostly in the South. Just as they had commemorated the Revolutionary War, citizens on both sides of the conflict glorified heroes by commissioning statues, and memorializing the battlegrounds as places of collective sacrifice—in defense of either the Union or the Confederacy. Commemorating the Civil War

presented obvious challenges for the Union that former military conflicts had not. The federal government took care to highlight the ideal of national unity even as it acknowledged the gravity of the South's former secession. Even as the War was still raging, Pennsylvania citizens bought up the land where the Battle of Gettysburg had been fought, and began orchestrating the commemoration of the dead, emphasizing Union sacrifices. In the patriotic tours orchestrated by railroad companies after the war, Civil War battlefields were not even included as sites of national pilgrimage, as they detracted from the goal of evoking a sense of the country's singular, mystical essence. At the same time, other battlegrounds—particularly sites of conflict with Native Americans—were showcased as important chapters in an overarching history of America's progress.

While the Lincoln Memorial was not built as a war memorial per se, its associations with the Civil War were inescapable. The anguish etched into the face and hands of Lincoln's statue acknowledged the gravity of the divisions that had led to the conflict, transforming the Mall into what art and architecture historian Kirk Savage has called “a space of engagement with loss and suffering” (Savage 2005: 251). Ultimately, however, the inclusion of the Lincoln Memorial reflected the federal government's attempt to consolidate and thus control the politics of memory. In 1933, the National Parks Service took a step further, taking over custodianship of all Civil War battlefields from the War Department, and commemorating them within its master narrative of national unity. During the same period, however, many Southerners took the commemoration of battlefields into their own hands. They remembered them within their own understanding of the South as having fought valiantly to defend “the religion of the lost cause,” retaining a distinctive sense of collective identity from the rest of the country (see Wilson 1983). Thus the

politics of national memory, which had undermined earlier efforts to consecrate the federal capital, were quietly returning again—foreshadowing a new phase of memorializing that would come to characterize the post-Vietnam era.

DECENTRALIZED MEMORY

By the 1940s, the infrastructural network of national monuments in America was largely complete. By train, or increasingly by car, citizens could travel to and interact with a constellation of natural and historical sites diffused throughout the nation. The city planners of Washington, DC, had at last succeeded in transforming the city into the memorial capital that L'Enfant had envisioned, by reconceptualizing the very notion of “sacred space.” A single governmental agency, the National Parks Service, oversaw, maintained, and commemorated the vast majority of these locales, helping to consolidate and give coherence to national memory. Together they recounted a simple if not simplistic story about the United States, one that emphasized its permanence and glory. America was founded on the ontological bedrock of Nature, enshrined in its many natural parks. Its expansion reflected the unstoppable history of progress, made evident in hydroelectric dams and dynamos, and valorized at historic sites and battlefields. Not even the Civil War had been able to thwart it. On the contrary, the dissolution and reunification of the Union turned out to be a collective experience of redemptive death and rebirth, a message that was writ large in the Lincoln Memorial.

From the hindsight of the twenty-first century, America’s heyday of political and symbolic consolidation—lasting roughly from 1880 to 1940—was short-lived. Even at the outset of the

Cold War era, the ideal of patriotic tourism was quickly giving way to a decidedly more individualistic notion of enjoying the nation's roadways for recreational or therapeutic purposes. The rising popularity of Las Vegas during the 1950s, or the building of Disneyland at the decade's end, exemplify this trend—which American studies scholar Marguerite Shaffer has characterized as “the ultimate quest for self-indulgent individual pleasure and hedonistic personal freedom in a culture of mass consumption...revolv[ing] around spectacle, fantasy, and desire” along the American highways (Shaffer 2001: 320). Even in the nation's capital, where John F. Kennedy exhorted citizens to ask what they could do for their country, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy transformed the White House into Camelot through her own exquisite wielding of pillbox hats and fabulous china. Consumerism, driven by the arousal and satiation of personal appetite, began to vie with America's collectivist ideals of sacrifice for the common good. In light of these individualizing trends, it became increasingly difficult to say what the significance of Mount Rushmore or the White House was for all Americans. The answers were as varied as the citizenry themselves, who continued to flock to national monuments on their own schedules and for their own reasons.

The nation's political culture also underwent a sea change during the 1960s, with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the mass protests against the Vietnam War. The National Mall was suddenly transformed from a memorial space of unity into a theater of protest. In different ways, both of these movements exposed and desanctified the violence inextricably linked to the nation's consolidation and expansion. Against their backdrop, the dark underside of earlier monuments glorifying war and conquest became disturbingly clear. To cite just one example, Anglo-Europeans had long memorialized an entire array of locales in the Black Hills of South

Dakota—including the iconic, twentieth-century Mount Rushmore National Memorial—as celebrating the myth of American progress. Following the rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the late 1960s, however, Lakota and other Native peoples reclaimed the region as their own, re-inscribing the same locales as memorials to America's orchestrated program of Indian genocide. Two decades earlier, Korczak Ziolkowski, a Polish American sculptor, had begun work on the Crazy Horse Memorial to commemorate one Indian warrior, but now the members of AIM were demanding the return of the Black Hills themselves to the Lakota Nation.

It would be inaccurate, however, to characterize these economic and political trends entirely as post-modern or post-nationalist developments. As we have seen, efforts to memorialize Washington, DC, were undercut during the first half of the nineteenth century by the Republican ethos of political decentralization and individualism. A striking example of this perspective was reflected in the proposal made by John Nicholas, a Virginian congressman and close friend of Thomas Jefferson, during the first debates over how to memorialize George Washington. Rather than building a crypt or a statue, Nicholas suggested leaving a plain tablet in the nation's capital, upon which each citizen could express what the Revolutionary hero meant to him. Further, the ambiguous meanings of Civil War battlefields, as interpreted alternatively by Northerners and Southerners during the heyday of national consolidation, offers a precedent for the political battles over national memory in the late-twentieth century.

There are, however, two unprecedented trends discernible in the ways that America memorializes itself today. The first lies in the novel design of many new public memorials built

since the 1982 dedication of Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Lin’s piece, the first major addition to the capital’s memorial landscape since the 1930s, came to change the expectations that Americans have about monuments. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a stark and minimalist space where individuals can develop their own relationships with the fact of the Vietnam War and/or the American veterans who perished in its wake. It consists of two walls—each approximately two hundred fifty feet long and comprised of one hundred forty polished black, marble panels—arranged in a “V” shape and meeting at a 125° angle. On the panels are inscribed the individual names of some fifty-eight thousand veterans who were killed or reported missing in action during the War. Constructed below ground level, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is intended to evoke the experience of descending into a grave. Unlike previous memorials, this one is horizontal rather than vertical. It makes no attempt to depict scenes of the conflict or to create likenesses of combatants. It lacks any iconography such as a flag or an eagle or the Great Seal that might suggest an association with the nation.

At the time of its unveiling, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial awakened a storm of controversy. Secretary of the Interior James Watt initially refused to grant a building permit for the memorial, while some onlookers described Lin’s piece as a “black gash of shame” and a “nihilistic slab of stone” (Wills 2007). Despite these initial protests, however, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been an immensely popular site since its dedication; over the first decade of the twenty-first century it drew between three and four million visitors each year (“NPS Stats”). Furthermore, it has become something of a prototype for other architects, who now take pains to distinguish their *memorials* as interactive and emotionally evocative spaces, from *monuments* as static and didactic shrines to nationalism (Doss 2010: 38). Many features of the National September 11

Memorial and Museum, for example, mimic those of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—including its horizontality, its lack of overt visual references to either the Twin Towers or the attacks upon them, and its inclusion of the individual names of the victims. The Oklahoma City National Memorial, to cite another example, is also minimalist in its design — organized around a long reflecting pool, remnants of the Murrah Building, and a field filled with 168 empty chairs — inviting visitors into a highly personal and interactive relationship with the memorial space. The new memorials inspired by Lin’s have effectively enshrined the iconoclastic and individualistic tendencies of American culture. They simultaneously commemorate the nation, and resist the ideal of proclaiming a singular American memory.

Related to this new architectural trend is the sheer proliferation of memorials in the present-day United States, a veritable “memorial mania” that American studies scholar Erika Doss has studied at length. Among the explanations Doss gives for the phenomenon are an explosion of the historical archives effected by new technologies (Doss 2010: 78), and heightened expectations of individual representation among the citizenry (Doss 2010: 19). In the first case, the modern idea of “making history,” once enacted in the consecration of Revolutionary liberty trees, is now realized through the construction of makeshift or permanent memorials, which showcase media representations of highly localized events in the form of photographs, videos, and recordings. In the second case, memorial mania reflects a convergence of the Enlightenment ideal of political individualism with the more Romantic notion of *expressive* individualism, where the voicing of sentiment is a value in and of itself. Given the lack of any single political, social, or religious content unifying this profusion of sites, Doss suggests that we think about

memorials primarily in terms of the emotions they embody and evoke, classifying them according to their predominant expressions of grief, fear, gratitude, anger, or shame.

The mania for memorializing reached a fever pitch in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, even spreading for a short time beyond the United States, as sympathizers around the world paid spontaneous tribute to the victims. To cite just one example, on September 12 at London’s Buckingham Palace, the Band of the Coldstream Guards played the Star Spangled Banner during the changing of Queen Elizabeth’s royal guards. A crowd of mostly American visitors, who had gathered in front of the palace to mourn the recent calamities, tearfully watched on, holding flags and newspaper photographs of the wreckage back home (Graves 2001).

Consistent with Doss’s analysis, post-September-11 memorials like this one were both decentralized and improvisational. They were driven by a high-tech and internationally coordinated network of media outlets, which repeatedly aired a small set of images portraying America-under-siege, including the now-iconic video spectacle of the collapsing Twin Towers. The gatherings were highly affective and—in hindsight—largely ephemeral performances. For just a few months, Americans could imagine themselves as a united people, forgetting all about the contentious “culture wars” that had been raging throughout the nation for at least two decades prior to 2001. In fact, it did not take very long for these divisions to return; within two years, the same footage that had effected a collective national catharsis could be watched again in conspiracy-theory videos, portraying the September 11 attacks as federally orchestrated.

What moral are we to draw from this radical decentralization and destabilization of American memory? On the one hand, Robert Bellah’s worst fears seem to have come true. When he

penned his first essay on American civil religion in 1967, Bellah spoke of the United States as undergoing a “time of trial,” faced with the choice between uniting around common principles, or disintegrating into a multitude of competing political factions (Bellah 1967: 40). Bellah hoped that by directing public attention to the mythic core of national identity—an amalgam of biblical ideals inherited from the Puritans—scholars of American religion could lend a hand to the cause of national reconciliation. But despite the repeated invocation of Puritan-derived, national mythology by American presidents since Ronald Reagan, the nation does not seem to have grown any more unified than it was in 1967—the few months of post-September-11 patriotism notwithstanding. Memorials since the Vietnam Veterans Memorial have enshrined dissent as the unifying ideal of the citizenry. Conversely, the profusion of memorials since the 1960s testifies to the plurality of American identities rather than a single national mythos derived from the New England Puritans.

On the other hand, the present-day decentralization of memory reflects a seamless continuation of post-religious strategies for evoking and perpetuating collective identity. As we have seen, modern notions of horizontal time and space, as well as democratic ideals of individualism, implicitly undermine the ideal of an unchanging and singular tradition. As early as the American Revolution, Puritan cosmology was giving way to new Enlightenment notions of space, time and community, and the architects of America’s memorial network during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries unified the country by evoking Nature in a distinctively modern key — as the sublime, though not transcendent, backdrop of national history

The tensions within the Revolutionary civil religion, which flattened transcendence without obliterating it, have finally given way today to the unqualified celebration of American society as cut loose and free in the boundlessness of horizontal time and space. Despite the loss of a coherent or stable national memory, America continues to replicate itself like never before, in and through countless acts of decentralized and private acts of memorializing, which proliferate endlessly and rhizomatically in a world with no center.

NOTES

¹ “I consider the work I do memorials, not monuments; in fact, I’ve often thought of them as anti-monuments. I think I don’t make objects; I make places. I think that is very important—the places set a stage for experience and for understanding experience. I don’t want to say these places are stages where you act out, but rather places where something happens within the viewer” (Lin 1995: 16).

² The idea that the nation is based on a new understanding of time as empty and homogenous constitutes the main thesis of Benedict Anderson’s now-classic monograph, *Imagined Communities* (rev. ed., 2006). Anderson’s analysis underscores the ways in which the rise of print-capitalism—and particularly the dissemination of daily newspapers—enabled readers to imagine themselves existing simultaneously alongside fellow citizens in the same “horizontal” time.

³ “‘Annihilation of space and time’ was the early-nineteenth-century characterization of the effect of railroad travel. The concept was based on the speed that the new means of transport was able to achieve. A given spatial distance, traditionally covered in a fixed amount of travel time,

could suddenly be dealt with in a fraction of that time; to put it another way, the same amount of time permitted one to cover the old spatial distance many times over” (Schivelbusch 1977: 33).

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