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MILITARY & DEFENSE

## What Kind Of Monument Will Give War On Terror Dead Their Due?

If there is to be a memorial, we need to be keep our differences over the war separate from respecting those who fought in it.

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Every July fourth I like to trade the imperial for the familial, escaping the confines of Washington DC and traveling back to the little slice of middle America that nurtured me. I've written about Altoona, Pennsylvania before, highlighting the city's efforts at revitalizing its downtown and constructing a sustainable path for growth. The evening before the holiday weekend, I found myself sitting outside at one of the newer restaurants downtown.

Across the street from my table was the city's Robert E. Laws Veterans Mall. Named for a World War II Medal of Honor recipient, the memorial contains three large bronze plaques bearing hundreds of names of local men who died in the two world wars. Next to them is a half-filled slab, listing the over one hundred casualties Altoona suffered in Korea and Vietnam.

What I noticed, added since my last visit, were the banners hanging from the lampposts that dot the city street. Each one was a tribute to a native son who had died in the War on Terror. Nine men, representing every branch of service, who shipped off to the Middle East or Central Asia, never again to set foot on Pennsylvanian soil.

My hometown hasn't endured a casualty since 2010, but other communities haven't been so fortunate. Half-

way through 2020, and nine more Americans have already died in Afghanistan, a two-decade, open-ended sinkhole of lives and money. And while the name "Operation Iraqi Freedom" might have been retired, thousands of American GIs still find themselves occupying Baghdad (against the wishes of its current government).

Returning to our capital, I wondered how my adopted city would honor and remember the nearly 15,000 soldiers and civilian contractors who paid the ultimate price. And how far should a memorial go in asking what that price in blood actually bought?

In 2017, Congress designated the Global War on Terror Memorial Foundation to lead the coordination and fundraising efforts to construct a memorial on the National Mall. They simultaneously waived the mandate that requires a minimum of ten years between the end of a military conflict and the planning of any memorial.

"Our mission is to plan, fund, and build the National Global War on Terrorism memorial on the National Mall in Washington D.C. among the memorials that represent our nation's history and the wars we fought in," said Marina Jackman, Director of Operations at the foundation, who recently completed eight years as a Medical Service Corps Officer at Fort Bragg.

Since the project is not being federally funded, donations primarily come

from a mixture of the American public and foundation board members, with checks ranging from \$2 to \$1,000.

Examples of board members include former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Peter Pace and former New Mexico Governor Susanna Martinez, while former President George W. Bush is titled the "Honorary Chairman."

While Jackman admits that they're "not close" to their eventual \$50 million goal, the foundation's primary focus in the past year has been nailing down an exact location on the National Mall. In November 2019, the Global War on Terrorism Memorial Location Act (H.R.5046) was introduced by Rep. Jason Crow (D-CO) and Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-WI), both War on Terror veterans. The bill will authorize surveying to begin and allocate one of three possible spots on the National Mall to the memorial, after which design decisions and construction can begin.

Despite having 76 cosponsors, H.R.5046 hasn't moved out of its subcommittee. Jackman credits the delay to the coronavirus pandemic, and the necessity of Congress turning its attention elsewhere. The foundation's new goal is to see it pass both House and Senate by the end of the year. When inquiries were made asking about how closely the bill's progress was being monitored, Rep. Crow's office did not reply to a request for comment, and

Rep. Gallagher's office responded with an identical quote they had given a separate publication last November.

Former Sgt. Dan McKnight, founder of the veteran's organization Bring Our Troops Home, believes the memorial is further evidence of Congress' dereliction of duty. "There are eighteen people who are sponsors of the Global War on Terror Memorial Act, that... two weeks ago voted to extend the War in Afghanistan indefinitely. Eighteen of the same people. I think they're trying to assuage a little bit of their guilt over pushing this war endlessly by creating a memorial to honor those that served," he said.

McKnight served for ten years in the Idaho National Guard, including an 18-month deployment to Afghanistan, and he opposes any War on Terror memorial on the National Mall until the conflict is concluded definitively.

McKnight is referring to an amendment, added to the National Defense Authorization Act, that prohibits the expenditure of money to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan. "I find the duplicity almost mindboggling, that they would put an amendment on the NDAA just two weeks ago that says President Trump can't bring troops home from Afghanistan, but at the same time we're going to honor those that are serving there by building this monument. To me it is an offensive, cowardly way to go about this whole process," he told TAC.

While we are still years away from a design, the message that the memorial will send remains the most controversial and polarizing aspect of the project.

When asked how they conceived a War on Terror memorial, Jackman said, "Our main thing would be our foundation's tenets: honor, heal, empower, unite. That's what we want to represent, and also other key factors; the fact that its multi-generational, the diversity of everyone involved."

"There is an interesting element that we do want to highlight that the other memorials can't capture, which is the unfinished part," Jackman added.

"We're still in active war, and obviously still ongoing with no end in sight. And that piece of it has been discussed, and how do we plan on capturing that unfinished portion into the memorial has been discussed."

The war being unfinished has led to

difficult situations for individuals like Michael "Rod" Rodriguez, President and CEO of the foundation. Rod's son, Antonio, recently returned from a deployment patrolling the same area of Afghanistan that his father once did.

Major Danny Sjursen served tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan before becoming a prolific writer and critic of U.S. foreign policy. He supports construction of the memorial but is adamant that it not take a jingoistic tone.

"I think the worst thing we could do is take the 7,000-combat dead and however many tangentially related dead and say this was part of the 'Freedom Agenda,'" he said. "I think we need to be honest as a country, and big enough as a country, to say we can memorialize the dead without sanctifying and sanitizing the war."

For instance, engraved in Altoona's veteran's memorial is the line from Baron Macaulay's most famous poem, "For how can man die better than in facing fearful odds, for the hearth stones of his fathers and the temples of his gods?"

This comforting message, however, is contradicted by the reality on the ground, like in Afghanistan, where U.S. soldiers are forced to protect local heroin production and tribal pedophiles.

McKnight hopes a future, post-war memorial would stand in opposition to its causes. "I think the message should be one of almost defiance and anger. And I would love to see a memorial, specifically for the Global War on Terror, that says never again," he said. "Never again will we allow our elected representatives in Washington DC to give away their constitutional responsibility to properly debate and declare war before we send our sons and daughters ... to bleed on foreign soil."

It'll be difficult for a War on Terror memorial to glamorize its namesake. Polling shows that a majority of both Americans and military veterans believe neither the war in Iraq nor Afghanistan were worth fighting. The end product certainly won't be a granite statue of David Petraeus.

On the other hand, should it be the goal of anti-interventionists to make the War on Terror memorial a political lightning rod? Is the metaphorical gravestone of the men who died—

themselves victims of the fighting—the best place to relitigate weapons of mass destruction? Is the point of a memorial to inform people that the soldiers died for a lie, or just that they died?

I think what is left unsaid can be just as powerful as what is said, and I take that inspiration from the Vietnam Veterans wall, one of the first memorials erected on the mall. "It is very, very different than the traditional, heroic war monument which is generally a courageous soldier or general on horseback, or brandishing a musket, and evokes feelings of courage, determination, and respect," explains Professor Christopher Hamner of George Mason University, who specializes in war and American society.

"The Vietnam wall is black, it's massive, it's funeral by design—the typeface is very reminiscent of the typeface used on headstones," he said. "It invites people to think deeply about what the war represents, what it meant, and that's not necessarily what everyone wanted from the memorial."

Exceedingly controversial when it was proposed, it has become one of the most beloved sites in DC. "The wall is polished to a mirror shine so as you go to look at the names you actually have to see your own face there. And the names are laid out by the date that the soldier was killed rather than alphabetically, deliberately to make it a little more challenging to find the person you're looking for so you have to look at a lot more names," continued Hamner, explaining why so many visitors make a soulful attachment.

Likewise, my heart was touched seeing those lamppost banners in Altoona; reading the names of the too-soon-departed, seeing their picture, thinking about how they died so far from home. They lacked either belligerence or pacifism and carried their message all the same. In mourning, less is more.

Whenever it is built, I trust the National Mall's War on Terror memorial to find the middle ground, treating the occasion to honor the dead with the respectful, somber reflection that national grief—for both the soldiers and the wars they fought in—deserves.

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