Silent Thunder: War Memorials and the Break Up of the Collectivistic Motive to Sacrifice

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Through an analytical discussion of the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom, a recently constructed public memorial to American soldiers killed in the Iraq war, this essay examines how Western narratives of soldierly sacrifice have been deployed in American war memorials. I begin by exploring how American war memorials have worked as sites of closure that symbolically reorder, imply, but ultimately hide the horror of death in the battlefield. I then discuss how inherited narratives of sacrifice—or what Kenneth Burke calls the "collectivistic motive" for sacrifice—have been essential to the making and memorializing of war in the United States. Although certain aesthetic and thematic attributes seem to situate the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom at a unique position within the long cultural tradition of American war memorials, this new memorial ultimately reverts to familiar notions of the 'sacrificial soldier.' In conclusion, I argue that particular events surrounding the Iraq war have rendered these notions dysfunctional, breaking apart the easy equation between the American war memorial and the memory of the sacrificial soldier.

On the front lawn of Kevin Roustazad's gravestone business in the commercial strip of Manassas, Virginia, a tall, dark, freestanding wall of blank granite panels stands at attention next to a flagpole, upon which an American flag flies. This landscape is the extent to which Roustazad's plan for a memorial to the sacrifice of American soldiers killed in the war in Iraq has come. But if Roustazad, an American citizen of Iranian descent, has his way, these stones will come to serve as a permanent national memorial to American soldiers lost in the Iraq war. The freestanding wall is designed to accommodate a yet undetermined number of granite panels that will depict the names, ranks, and

official military portrait photographs (etched in ceramic plates) of a yet unknown number of American soldiers killed in a war that has yet to end. Through personal investment and grassroots fundraising, Roustazad is creating a memorial to one of the many human costs of the war in Iraq. He has named the site the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom. "Even though the soldiers' voices have fallen silent, their thunder is alive," says Roustazad. "And when you look at them looking back at you, you will feel they capture your heart and your mind" (Roustazad).

As public memory has become the focus of a large, growing, and interdisciplinary body of literature, scholars have turned to war memorials and their audiences as fruitful subjects of investigation. For instance, Sarah J. Purcell has revealed how the meanings and audience receptions of a Revolutionary War monument in Charlestown, Massachusetts, have been subject to constant renegotiation; recently, the memorial has been appropriated as a symbolic gathering space where local activist groups rally against violent crime occurring in the community. Kirk Savage has explored how the history of America's slavery and its violent end (the Civil War) were transmitted through the sculptural monuments that increasingly came to dominate public space in nineteenth-century America; these sculptures, often depicting a male slave groveling before his benefactor President Lincoln, worked to reinforce the collective (and convenient) memory of the North's righteous role in the war. Recently, a number of scholars have critically examined how war memorials on the Mall in Washington, D.C., function as memory texts where publics gather to define themselves vis-à-vis material representations of soldierly sacrifice. And attention has been paid to the typology, semiology, and political meaning of civic monuments raised in memory to French soldiers killed in the First World War.[1]

The purpose of this essay is to provide an analytical discussion of the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom that will enable an examination of how Western narratives of soldierly sacrifice have been deployed in American war memorials. I begin by exploring how American war memorials have worked as sites of closure that symbolically reorder, imply, but ultimately hide the horror of death in the battlefield. I then discuss how inherited narratives of sacrifice—or what Kenneth Burke (397) calls the "collectivistic motive" for sacrifice—have been essential to the making and memorializing of war in the United States. Although certain aesthetic and thematic attributes seem to situate the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom at a unique position within the long cultural tradition of American war memorials, Roustazad's memorial ultimately reverts to familiar notions of the 'sacrificial soldier.' In conclusion, I argue that particular events surrounding the Iraq war have rendered these notions dysfunctional,

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[1] See Sarah J. Purcell, "Commemoration, Public Art, and the Changing Meaning of the Bunker Hill Monument," *Public Historian* 25.2 (2003): 55-71; Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Marita Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Representations* 35 (1991): 118-142; Kim Servart Theriault, "Re-membering Vietnam: War, Trauma, and 'Scarring Over' After 'The Wall,'" *Journal of American Culture* 26.4 (2003); Barbara A. Biesecker, "Remembering World War II: The Rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the Turn of the 21st Century," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88.4 (2002): 393-409; Antoine Prost, "Monuments to the Dead," *Realms of Memory: Construction of the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora (New York: Columbia University Press 1997) 306-330; and Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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American War Memorials and Sacrifice

Kirk Savage tells us that every war memorial serves as both a rhetorical and physical space where publics can "gather and define themselves at ceremonies and rallies." It is a space of resolution and compromise not of prolonged conflict:

> Even now, to commemorate is to seek historical closure, to draw together the various strands of meaning present in a speech or a monument. It is true that the process of commemoration often leads to conflict, not closure, because in defining the past we define our present. Yet in choosing to remember "historical" events or heroes we still hope to plunge them into a past secured against the vicissitudes of the present.

Recent controversies over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the World War II Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. have shown that the process of commemoration in the United States can also be a process of conflict "where many different social groups fight for access and fight for control of the images that define them" (4-7). But the war memorial, ultimately, is a site of closure where a static memory of the past rises above present disagreements. As such, the war memorial represents a viable form of group communication and memory, and operates as a symbolic and physical antithesis to the shattering, rupturing, destructive space it commemorates: the battlefield.

Paul Virilio argues that the battlefield is a traumatic and violent break from the stable and seemingly harmonious systems of communications in society: "The battlefield is the place where social intercourse breaks off, where political rapprochement fails, making way for the inculcation of terror… Orders, in fact speech of any kind, are transmitted by long-range instruments which, in any case, are often inaudible among combatants' screams, the clash of arms, and, later, the various explosions and detonations" (6). Each war memorial, "always tempered by a foregrounding of the lives lost in battle" (Sturken 120), attempts to serve as a single location that reorders and makes sense of the atomization and chaos of the combat zone. This reconfiguration never truly reveals the "screams," the "clash of arms," the "explosions and detonations" (i.e. the terror soldiers experience in combat), for to do so would defeat the memorial's purpose as a site of closure. As Henri Lefebvre writes, "To the degree that there are traces of violence and death, negativity and aggressiveness in social practice, the monumental work erases them and replaces them with a tranquil power and certitude which encompass violence and terror" (222). Yet within memorials we find implications of the terror and violence of the battlefield through representations of the factual deaths of soldiers. Simultaneously revealing and obfuscating the realities of war, memorials "embody grief, loss, and tribute or obligation; in so doing, they serve to frame particular historical narratives" (Sturken 120). With few exceptions, these narratives include Western notions of the sacrifice inherited from Ancient Greek and biblical traditions.

The western world inherits its idolization of the 'sacrificial soldier' perhaps most directly from Pericles' funeral oration. At the public burial of the remains of the Athenians killed in the Peloponnesian War against Sparta, Athenian general Pericles delivered his famous speech about the value of democracy and the memory of those who

had died in its defense. In this classic "epideictic utterance about soldiers from 'our side' who died in battle" (Corbett and Connors 212), Pericles urged the living to:

> realize the power of Athens, and feed your eyes upon her from day to day, till love of her fills your hearts; and then, when all her greatness shall break upon you, you must reflect that it was by courage, sense of duty, and a keen feeling of honor in action that men were enabled to win all this, and that no personal failure in an enterprise could make them consent to deprive their country of their valor, but they laid it at her feet as the most glorious contribution that they could offer.

The relatives and widows of the dead were to be comforted by the knowledge that the soldiers had willingly offered up their lives in defense of the Athenian state and its democratic ideals of peace, justice, and freedom. Pericles advised those "still of an age to beget children" to bear future citizen soldiers, for "not only will they help you forget those whom you have lost, but will be to the state at once a reinforcement and a security." The sepulcher where the bodily remains were buried, "the noblest of shrines wherein [the soldiers'] glory is laid up to be eternally remembered," would serve as a site of closure and permanent declaration of the most righteous of civic acts: sacrificing life for the state (Thucydides 2.34-46).

Building upon this notion of sacrifice, Christianity—a foundational tradition of the western world—portrayed Christ's sacrificial death as the perfect model of righteous action. In the Old Testament, an individual who offered a sacrifice did not offer her/himself, but instead offered a precious possession in substitution, such as a child (as in the story of Abraham and Isaac) or an animal. With Christ's death, the sacrificer's gift of her/himself became literal. Although Christ's last words ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") implied a lack of agency, it was Christ's *willingness* to die that consecrated humanity's new covenant with God—for such willingness is not easy to attain, even for the Son of God:

> Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (*The New International Version of the Bible*, Luke 22.42-44)

With heavenly support, in the final hours of life Christ found the will to offer himself to death to save the whole of humanity.

References to these inherited notions of sacrifice can usually be seen in American war memorials. For instance, visitors of any American World War I or World War II overseas cemetery and memorial discover an overwhelming sea of white marble headstones in the shape of the Latin cross, a familiar allusion to Christ's sacrifice.[2] For

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[2] A small percentage of the headstones are in the shape of the Star of David and commemorate those soldiers who were known to be of Jewish Faith. But given the demographics of the United States armed forces during World War I and World War II, an overwhelming majority of the headstones take the shape of the Latin cross. The image of the Latin cross itself, appearing over and over again in precisely aligned rows at each cemetery, is a well-known ideograph, a historical, visual symbol that signifies familiar meanings within most Western cultures. In *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, Rev. George Ferguson isolates the Latin cross's 20th century denotation: "The cross is one of the oldest and most universal of all symbols. It is, of course, the perfect symbol of Christ because of His sacrifice upon the Cross. In a broader sense, however, the cross has become the mark or sign of the Christian religion, the emblem of atonement,

visitors (American or otherwise), it becomes hard to deny the swelling sense of sacrifice that permeates from the numerous, harmonized rows of white crosses. Every soldier's death becomes a sacrifice for the collective good of the citizens of Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world—not just the American state. Additionally, each buried soldier attains salvation, as his or her actions of war—presumably violent and against Christianity's philosophy of peace—are justified, forgiven, and wiped away. Ironically, we should note, these religious connotations outweigh the memory of the cross as an instrument of justified torture and death used by the state against its citizens.

The recently constructed World War II Memorial, situated closer to home on the National Mall, exhibits soldierly sacrifice in less religious, but just as powerful, terms. Etched at the bottom of the site's "Freedom Wall"—a wall of 4,000 stars, each representing a hundred American lives lost in the "good war"—is the inscription: HERE WE MARK THE PRICE OF FREEDOM. At the site's dedication on Memorial Day of 2004, Senator Bob Dole elaborated upon this price that Americans have so often been asked to pay:

> What we dedicate today is not a memorial to war. Rather, it is a tribute to the physical and moral courage that makes heroes out of farm and city boys, that inspires Americans in every generation to lay down their lives for people they will never meet, for ideals that make life itself worth living… Certainly the heroes represented by the 4,000 gold stars on the "Freedom Wall" need no monument to commemorate their sacrifice. They are known to God and their fellow soldiers, who will mourn their passing until the day of our own. In their names, we dedicate this place of meditation. (Dole)

Like Pericles, Dole was a witness to the terror of war: stationed in the hills of Italy, his arm was ripped apart by Nazi gunfire during a frantic attempt to save a dying friend. But Dole's dedication speech, like Pericles' funeral oration and the abstract representation of death in the "Freedom Wall," sublimates the terror of war into the heroism of soldierly sacrifice. Instead of testifying to the blood and guts that define combat, Dole's words focus on the majesty of the American soldier's sacrificial nature (so self-evident that its memorialization is almost perfunctory) and suggest that the "WE" inscribed below the gold stars stands for all of humanity.

We can even find notions of sacrifice in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a site that is generally understood to have "eliminated all hint of a celebration of affirmation of patriotism, the nobility of arms, or the dignity of dying for a just cause" (Winter 104-105). Comprised of two black granite walls that list the name of 58,000 war dead, this memorial has been described by critics and observers as a "black spot in American history," a "tombstone," and a "black gash of shame" (Sturken 122). Maya Lin, the architect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, intended the site "to be extremely honest about the facts of not so much the *politics* of war but the *results* of war." Thus, she designed the memorial to "register loss on a fundamental, individual level" (Lin). Indeed, the site seems void of the redemptive qualities of sacrifice so prominently touted in other

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and the symbol of "salvation and redemption through Christianity." For Christians, the Latin cross signifies "sacrifice," "atonement," salvation," and "redemption." In summation, the Latin cross remembers Christ's sacrifice for the collective good, the subsequent resurrection of Christ's flesh, and the journey of Christ's soul to heaven (100).

war memorials. As Jay Winter writes, "All we see are names, and our own reflection" (Winter 105). But, I argue, it is in each visitor's reflection, a frame for hundreds of names of the dead, that we can find the argument for sacrifice: "These American soldiers were willing to rise to a calling, fight, and die for you, the visitor—even in a war that has become known as the 'bad war.'" The sacrifice of the soldiers is evident and ever-present, even if the site serves as a criticism of government policies in Vietnam and a sober reminder of the results of the war.

We begin to see that the "heroism" found in American war memorials is rooted in an inherited definition of sacrifice as an individual act for the benefit of the common good. But upon reflection, sacrifice, in such terms, is an inherent contradiction to the promise of capitalistic democracy. Kenneth Burke sheds light on this contradiction, arguing that during times of peace in America, there is "neither need nor room for a concept of individual sacrifice for the collective good," for within Adam Smith vision of society, "individual aggrandizements are made synonymous with public benefits." But in times of war—and in our memories of war—we imagine an Athenian democracy in which there exists a "collectivistic motive" for sacrifice:

> An individual sacrifice must be presented in terms of public benefit. An individual impoverishment must be presented in terms of public wealth. An individual risk in terms of group security. In other words, for the conditions of a war economy, as for the conditions of warfare itself, we need a collectivistic motive, which will be shared by all except the war profiteers and the empire-builders of big business.

Similar to professional baseball teams, those "privately owned businesses which but have the *mask* of public institutions," in times of war the U.S. military functions as a necessary collective entity whose efforts must be greeted by the average citizen with personal sacrifice or support (Burke 395-397).

The U.S. military is routinely successful at maintaining this "mask of the public institution" largely because Americans have been conditioned, "not directly to belief and behavior, but to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief." According to Michael Calvin McGee, "human beings will react predictably and autonomically" to ideographs—words and phrases that serve as the building blocks of ideology. Historically, terms like 'law,' 'liberty,' 'tyranny,' 'freedom,' and 'sacrifice' have served as ideographs in the United States. These and other ideographs, which we find in political speeches of war and in the texts and designs of American war memorials, contribute to an effective "rhetoric of control" that maintains a collectivistic motive to sacrifice in war. Writing of American support for war in Vietnam, McGee tells us:

> So it was that a majority of Americans were surprised, not when allegedly sane young men agreed to go halfway around the world to kill for God, country, apple pie, and no other particularly good reason, but, rather, when other young men displayed good common sense by moving to Montreal instead, thereby refusing to be conspicuous in a civil war which was none of their business… We make a rhetoric of war to persuade us of war's necessity, but then forget that it is a rhetoric—and regard negative popular judgments of it as unpatriotic cowardice. (6)

Depicting this rhetoric of war, American war memorials stride between day-to-day capitalistic democracy (so void of the potential for heroic sacrifice) and the necessary reversion to archaic societies in times of military conflict.

The Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom

At first inspection, particular aesthetic and thematic attributes of the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom situate the memorial at a unique position within the long cultural tradition of American war memorials. The first such attribute is the (yet-to-be executed) photographic representation of each American soldier killed; no other permanent, public American war memorial has attempted such a feat. Each soldier will be depicted in her or his military portrait photograph—a headshot of the subject in full military garb. This combination of highly mimetic form and mass listing suggests that each individual soldier must be considered in her or his irreducible, unique, indelible physical visage. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a showcase of the magnitude of deaths in the Vietnam War and the representational power of listing, employs listing as a resistance to the reductionism of the iconic memorial. Whereas monuments like the Korean War Veterans Memorial on the National Mall and the Marine Corps War Memorial (depicting the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima) in Arlington, VA, represent vast numbers of soldiers through the mimetic portrayals of a few soldiers' bodies, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial uses an aesthetic that refers itself to script and the archival documentation of the dead, thus offering an impression of the cold anonymity of the individual soldier among the seemingly infinite number of those killed. Though considered "the first national monument to elevate the individual above the cause" (Schwartz 430), the Vietnam Veterans Memorial reduces individuals down to uniformly shaped names that the war machine ate up—an emotional, but ultimately abstract, representation of each dead soldier.[3] Silent Thunder, it seems, goes beyond all previous American memorials by displaying the unique human face of each dead soldier.

Furthermore, Roustazad's decision to exhibit photographs of fallen soldiers enters into the rhetorical framework of a war in which any visible depiction of casualties has already been charged with enormous power. Michael Griffin claims that "an intuitive belief in the power of the camera to reflect, reveal and expose fundamentally" has persisted throughout the Iraq war (Griffin). For instance, the Bush Administration and the Pentagon have fought to suppress images of flag-draped American coffins returning from Iraq, citing a dubious moral imperative to respect the privacy of grieving military families ("Bush"). Deepa Kumar reminds us that reporters who wished to be "embedded" with invading American forces "had to sign a contract with the military agreeing to a 50-point program that stated what they could and could not report" (60). Close scrutiny of this contract reveals the U.S. military's early desire to control the dissemination of photographs that could potentially reveal and personalize the "horrors" of what was supposed to be a clean, just war:

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[3] In 1984, public outcry concerning the abstract nature of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial forced the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts to place on an adjacent site a statue of American soldiers, Frederick Hart's *Three Fighting Men*. It appears that this statue did not fully satiate the apparent and pressing need to remember those whose names appear on the Wall through visual representations of their bodies; in 2003, President George W. Bush signed a bill that authorized the construction of a visitor's center between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial; this facility will feature photographs of the dead ("President").

Point 40: No photographs or other visual media showing an enemy prisoner of war or detainee's recognizable face, nametag or other identifying feature or item may be taken. No interviews with detainees will be granted.

Point 43: Although images of casualties are authorized to show the horrors of war, no photographs or other visual media showing a deceased service member's recognizable face, nametag or other identifying feature of item may be taken. ("CFLCC")

Because of these and other restrictions during the outbreak of the American invasion, "photographs that did not lend illustrative support to the official US government version of events were rarely published" (Griffin). In April 2004, as the war progressed and the numbers of American war dead rose, Ted Koppel of ABC's *Nightline* prepared a program titled "The Fallen," in which he read the names of each of the 724 American servicemen and servicewomen killed in Iraq. Each name was accompanied by the presentation of the deceased's official military portrait. The Sinclair Broadcast Group refused to air the program on its television channels, claiming that Koppel's program appeared "to be motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq." While the Bush administration approved of Sinclair's decision, leaders such as Senator John McCain found this censorship of "war's terrible costs" to be "unpatriotic." "The controversy," writes Juan Cole, "clearly lay in the presentation of over 700 images of real human faces, belonging to the deceased" (Cole).

Shortly after this episode, as the gravity of the horrific, American-made conditions in Iraq became more apparent, images of prisoner abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison became available to the world. In these images, detractors of the War in Iraq found all the evidence required to prove the immorality of the war. Others attributed the images and the events they documented to be the work of a few 'bad apples,' Army Specialists Lynndie England and Charles Graner (whose images, ironically, *were* widely disseminated in an apparent effort to reframe the event into individual criminality). The Department of Defense quickly urged a federal judge to rewrite the Freedom of Information Act to prevent the release of more photos depicting torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib, arguing that such images "would endanger the safety and lives of individuals, including soldiers and civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere" (Carr). It is against this framework of censorship, suppression, and anxiety over the use of imagery that Silent Thunder's photographs will be seen permanently. Roustazad is making that which has been invisible—through formal and informal censorship—visible for a long time.

The fact that Silent Thunder is being constructed during the war it works to remember is highly unusual.[4] But this collapsing of time reflects issues of instantaneity deeply rooted in the Iraq war. In what has gone down as a gross misperception of hegemonic power, on March 23, 2003 the Bush Administration directed the U.S. military into Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. Accompanied by "embedded" television

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[4] In *Standing Soldiers*, Kirk Savage shows that regional memorials to soldiers killed in the Civil War were constructed well after the end of the war, sometimes decades later. Planning for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial began in 1979, four years after the end of the Vietnam War; the site's dedication occurred in 1982. The Korean War Veterans Memorial was dedicated on July 27, 1995, the 42nd anniversary of the armistice that had ended the war's bloodshed. And the World War II Memorial was inaugurated *six decades* after V-Day.

journalists reporting live from the combat zone, American military forces swiftly decimated Hussein's army and occupied the capital of Baghdad. Before the dust of Operation Shock and Awe had settled, George Bush stood upon a battleship off of San Diego and declared: "Mission accomplished." Despite the increasingly apparent backfire to the promise of the Iraq war as a single event without beginning and end, this consideration of time as purely instant and in the present moment has permeated American expectations of the war.[5] Never anticipating that the war in Iraq would last as long as it has, Roustazad finds himself in the anomalous situation of constructing a memorial to a war that is evolving everyday and whose ultimate meaning remains unknown.

But the notion that the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom, like the ongoing war, is open-ended and lacks a visible conclusion instills the site with a sharp critical perspective. As previously mentioned, Silent Thunder is designed to accommodate an unlimited number of granite panels (from a bird's eye view, imagine a "T" with a short cross hair and a vertical line that can go down indefinitely; this vertical line is formed by granite panels seven feet tall and ten feet wide) on which Roustazad will mount portrait photographs of the dead. This accommodation for future panels is, in itself, a tragic performance of future, invisible, but inevitable violent deaths. The power of such a performance has been seen before in American culture, usually through performance protest. In 1936, a group of Princeton University students established Veterans of Future Wars, a satirical but political organization that demanded pre-payment of compensation for wars their generation would inevitably have to fight. Partly lampooning the World War I veterans of the "Bonus Army" who had lobbied for and received war compensation a decade earlier than promised, but also critiquing the U.S. government's wartime dependence upon the bodies of young men, the group argued, "It is but a common right that this bonus be paid now, for many will be killed or wounded in the next war, and hence they, the most deserving, will not otherwise get the full benefit of their country's gratitude" ("The Veterans").[6] In the late 1980s, the activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) staged guerrilla theater "die-ins," such as the highly reported event outside St Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, where the bodies of protestors "were outlined in paint and chalk to emphasize the deadly effects of social indifference to AIDS" (Christiensen and Hanson). Recently, the anti-tobacco organization The Truth has developed a series of television and Internet public service announcements that attempt to visibly represent the magnitude of future tobacco-related deaths in the United States (http://www.thetruth.com).

We can even find such performance in the reflecting pool outside the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia, where a chronological series of images depicting the factual lynches of African Americans is inscribed around the rim of the pool. As Carole Blair notes, the section of the rim that represents the present and the future is left blank, leaving us with the unstated but powerful question, "Will this section remain blank, or will there be more

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[5] This was never more apparent than when the length of the Iraq war exceeded the amount of time the United States had fought in World War II. On November 26, 2006, the *Washington Post* dedicated an entire page (B4) to public reaction to and outrage over this sobering marker of the Iraq war's open-endedness.
[6] Although the VFW would boast 50,000 members through campus chapters across the country, the pre-paid bonus was never received. All but one of the original Princeton members of the VFW would go on to fight in World War II ("The Veterans").

lynches to document" (Blair)? We can detect a similar question in Silent Thunder: "Will more American soldiers be added to this wall?" For most visitors, the answer seems to be a tragic "yes." In an article about Silent Thunder's dedication in April 2006, the *Washington Post* described Manassas Mayor Douglas S. Waldron's reaction to the empty wall: "As he stood before the smooth black stones, Waldron said he knew they weren't blank. 'I know there are names that are waiting to be engraved on this,' he said" (Vargas). Waldron's words indicate an awareness of the peculiar fact that Silent Thunder has collapsed the present into the past and, like the Iraq war, both the past and present into the future. Unlike other war memorials, there is no real promise of closure.

Traditional Meanings

Despite these unique aesthetic and thematic attributes, the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom remains entrenched in the traditional meanings and ideographs that have been fundamental to the making and remembrance of war in the United States. In order to be read as an American war memorial, as per Roustazad's intentions, Silent Thunder *must* convey and refer to elements inherent to this genre of space. Jonathan Gray points out that for a text (in this case, a memorial) to be understood within the appropriate range of interpretations, the text must satisfy "one's understanding of the medium, what one knows or expects of its structure, genres, and tropes, and how one has been trained to make sense of its messages, style and rhetoric" (223). Thus, through its physical presentation—which includes the atypical use of photographic imagery—Silent Thunder has been defined as a memorial—a space where publics can gather to remember, honor, and mourn the heroic sacrifice of American soldiers.

The memorial's name—Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom—which according to Roustazad will be inscribed around the base of the wall, immediately connotes specific attributes of American war making and remembrance. Although Roustazad claims "Silent Thunder" is a reference to "Rolling Thunder," an annual Memorial Day motorcycle ride by thousands of veterans through Washington, D.C. (Vargas), the term triggers memories of the official, slogan-like names that have been assigned to American military invasions in recent decades: Operation Urgent Fury (Grenada), Operation Just Cause (Panama), Operation Desert Storm (Iraq), Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan), and Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq). "Memorial" serves as an overt pronouncement of the site's identity and purpose; we are to know that this site is a memorial as much as anything found on the National Mall. And "Freedom," a word commonly heard in George W. Bush's war speeches, openly declares the cherished rights for which American soldiers supposedly *freely* fought and died: the freedom of self-determination and the freedom from the interference of others. Together these words construct a name that stretches American reverence-laden vocabulary almost to the breaking point of seriousness.

The photographic images of the dead will work to suspend the remembered soldiers somewhere between life and death. Despite postmodern attacks on the premise that a photograph can present a privileged window onto reality and truth, a general belief in photography's original function—to document and express what has been—still lingers. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes of photography's peculiar trait:

> Photography's Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call "photographic referent" not the *optionally* real thing

to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having sent it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often "chimeras." Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past. (76)

Roustazad's decision to represent each dead soldier through the medium of photography capitalizes on commonly held assumptions (eloquently described by Barthes) about photography's ability to reveal the truth of what has been. Although the dead soldiers are gone, their photographic representations will reinforce the truth that they once were here, alive, and visible to those around them. Like the Greek sepulcher, this memorial will freeze the dead in an ever present now, rather than letting them transcend their earthly visage. It is the simultaneous action of recognizing the dead through representations of life that forms the paradoxical effect of American war memorials like the Marine Corps War Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, and Frederick Hart's *Three Fighting Men* at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Though one could argue that, through using actual photographs of actual people as re-presentations of the dead, Silent Thunder pushes this tradition to the limits, this memorial nevertheless remains within the representational paradigm established by previous monuments.

Similar to America's overseas World War I and World War II cemeteries, Silent Thunder claims an authoritative, state-like possession over the soldierly dead. Although Roustazad voluntarily contacts each dead soldier's family for permission to display the photographic portraits, an act that acknowledges the domestic life of the American soldier, the dead will be represented and remembered solely for the fact that they perished fighting for the state. Any previous identities will be wiped away, to the point where the worth of each soldier can only be measured in her or his moment of death. Roustazad says:

One reason, to me, that having the faces on is very important, is that many of our young soldiers who've died have left very young children behind, some of them born after their death. I was hoping that when these young families come to visit, not only will they see their mom's face, their dad's face, they will also see the other heroes they died with. Many of these men and women died alongside the comrades they were serving with. Very few of them just died as a single person. So we're going to put these people together. So when they come, they'll see mom and dad, and they'll see their friends who gave their lives along with them. (Roustazad)

One might argue that the photographic images, which imply the general atrocity of the young soldiers' deaths, could lead many to see Silent Thunder as a protest piece rather than a traditional war memorial that affirms nationalistic ideals. But the framing of these photographs within the physical and textual edifice of a war memorial, which cannot escape the nationalistic strictures of its genre, leaves little doubt as to the site's reverence of the soldiers' sacrifice for the nation.

Currently, Silent Thunder rests on the front yard of Roustazad's gravestone business, Eastern Memorials. Motorists passing by on Centreville Road, Manassas's main commercial thoroughfare, may be startled to see the tall, polished slabs of black granite

emerge into their field of vision. The gleaming and unblemished wall is a visual anomaly to the car dealerships, fast food chains, gas stations, and pharmacies that have come to clutter much of northern Virginia's landscape. For the present time, one might think that in standing out within this day-to-day capitalistic environment, Silent Thunder—like a moral, anti-war scoreboard tallying a somber count—subversively invites citizens to stop, pay attention, and witness the fact that American soldiers continue to die in Iraq. In actuality, financial circumstances and zoning ordinances have necessitated the construction of the memorial on Roustazad's land (Roustazad). But, perhaps sensing the possibility that people will misinterpret his memorial, Roustazad is raising the funds and political support necessary to move Silent Thunder to a "suitable site" (Thurman), such as one of Manassas's public parks. Thus, Silent Thunder's current geographical location is only temporary. In the near future, the memorial—like other memorials standing on town squares, public parks, and the hallowed grounds of the National Mall in Washington, D.C.—will occupy a space designated for public gathering and remembrance. On the memorial's official website, Roustazad's non-profit group states: "Our belief is that this memorial will be an appropriate way to not only recognize and honor the sacrifice and loyalty of each fallen hero, but will also function as a reminder to those of us who enjoy freedom that we owe a great debt of gratitude to the many who answered our country's call to serve" (Thurman). Thus, Roustazad and his supporters have a clear understanding that for this memorial to accomplish its purpose, it must fall in line with what tradition has already constructed as the proper space for communication between the message of soldierly sacrifice inscribed in a war memorial and the public.

Conclusion

Like previous American war memorials, Silent Thunder is a gathering place that reinforces the magnitude of American soldierly sacrifice. Relying on the importance of recognizable ideographs and the emotional visual depictions of soldiers' faces, it erases the horror of death in combat, but also displays the factual truth of the soldiers' deaths. Each dead soldier's identity as 'an American soldier' is never in question, as the deceased are represented and remembered solely for dying in war. There is no question of the soldierly role in the nation. There is, ultimately, only the emphasis on the sacrifice of the soldiers for the public good. But this emphasis loses its meaning amidst the overwhelmingly negative aspects of a war that has rendered our common ideographs— "freedom," "justice," "democracy"—dysfunctional, to the point where they have been used to justify their polar opposites (e.g. wiretapping Americans to protect their freedom, using torture to prevent violence, imposing 'government by the people' on Iraqis without the Iraqi people's consent).

This phenomenon leads us to a number of urgent questions: Is it possible to rationalize sacrifice in a war that increasingly appears to have been born from false pretenses? How do we celebrate the collectivistic motive to sacrifice in a war that has been fought by a "volunteer" army largely composed of those from the margins of American society?[7] How do we commemorate soldierly sacrifice for the public good in a

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[7] Currently, a disproportionate percentage of U.S. soldiers fighting in Iraq are from lower economic class backgrounds, a fact that has led Pentagon analysts to worry about "a growing divide between the military and much of society." Increasingly, potential recruits from middle- and upper class families have simply opted out of military service because they can afford to (Bowman). As the war in Iraq has dragged on, it

war that has been fought by a military that is all but entirely privatized?[8] How do we memorialize those who have died in a conflict that leading mainstream politicians have termed "a waste of American lives?"[9] Responses to these critical questions are all the more difficult to formulate when we acknowledge that the Iraq war, secretly devised by war hawk business managers,[10] was always meant to benefit a small ruling class.[11] Yet, in

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has become increasingly unpopular within African-American communities; as a result, African-American enlistment rates have dropped by more than 50 percent since 2000 (White). These and other trends, such as the American public's growing and overwhelming displeasure with the Bush administration's handling of the war (Steinhauser), have made it ever more difficult for military recruiters to meet monthly enlistment quotas. In response to this challenge, the Pentagon has widened its pool of potential enlistment candidates to include non-citizens; today more than 20,000 "green-card warriors" from nations around the world are serving in the U.S. military (Gutierrez and Drash). The 'success' of this program has led some Washington, D.C. think tanks to urge the military to begin recruiting undocumented immigrants living illegally in the United States (Cardenas). This ongoing struggle to enlist new soldiers has also led the U.S. Army to allow more high school dropouts and applicants with low aptitude test scores to join the service. In addition, the Army has increased the number of "moral waivers" it gives to applicants who have been convicted of serious misdemeanor offenses (aggravated assault, burglary, robbery, and vehicular homicide) and felonies; 11.7 percent of the Army's 2006 new recruits possessed prior criminal histories (Alvarez). This last fact should spark great concern when we consider the recent Department of Defense report that claims, "Women serving in the U.S. military are more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire in Iraq" (Harman).

[8] Writing at the end of the Second World War, Kenneth Burke observed, "Perhaps the one public institution that is generally spared invidious comparison with private models in the steady propaganda of our press is the military. I have never heard it said that we should let out our wars to private contractors, so far as the recruiting of a fighting force itself is concerned, though of course we are encouraged to find a place for the private contractor at every other stage of equipment and action" (395). Today, these words seem quaint. On December 5, 2006, the *Washington Post* reported: "There are about 100,000 government contractors operating in Iraq, not counting subcontractors, a total that is approaching the size of the U.S. military force there," and tenfold "the number of contractors that were deployed during the Persian Gulf War in 1991" (Merle). The magnitude of these figures is shocking—even to those familiar with the increasing symbiosis between the United States military and the corporate world—and only reinforces the argument that Iraq war has been akin to a private enterprise.

   Although the contracting-consulting industry has played a major role in the American defense establishment since World War II, the phenomenon has never been as transparent, intense, and unchecked as it today. In 1994, in response to recommendations from a task force headed by Vice President Gore, Congress ratified legislation that severely eased the rules and oversight of the Pentagon's use of contractors (Rearden 186). Between 1994 and 2002, the Department of Defense entered into more than 3,000 contracts with U.S.-based firms at a cost of $300 billion to American taxpayers. The military functions that have been outsourced range from the minor (laundry, food services, base upkeep) to the critical (security, military advice, training, logistics support, policing, technological expertise, base construction, prisoner interrogation, intelligence). In Iraq today, most of these tasks are handled by for-profit consultant firms, such as DynCorp International, Kellogg, Brown and Root, and L-3 Communications—historically shady companies that might hold more concern for 'the bottom line' than U.S. strategic interests (Merle and Singer).

[9] In March of 2007, Senators and presidential hopefuls John McCain and Barack Obama publicly stated that the lives of American soldiers had been "wasted" in Iraq (Nagourney).

[10] In 2000, American citizens elected the Bush-Cheney ticket, ushering in a network of right-wing business managers who openly promised to divest the state, cut it up, and give it away to corporations. In the words of Grover Norquist, the so-called "Field Marshal of the Bush Plan," the administration would work to strip the government of many of its public institutions and functions in order "to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub" (Dreyfuss). These business managers, fueled by a drive to privatize, were also the war hawks of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), a group that publicly champions a more aggressive approach to United States defense spending and foreign relations. Three foundations closely tied to Persian Gulf oil and weapons and defense industries fund the PNAC. In 1997, members of

light of the fact that the mask of the collectivistic motive to sacrifice has been pulled off and tossed away, these questions *must be* answered on the ground of socio-political American life if we are to restore in our minds, if not the idea of a just war, at least the notion of a necessary war in which the entire body of the nation is called to sacrifice in a visibly just and fair way.

In conclusion, it appears that the Iraq war has, in the very least, broken apart the traditionally easy equation between the American war memorial and the memory of the sacrificial soldier. Like the Iraq war—which according to Senator John McCain could last another 100 years—the Silent Thunder Memorial for Freedom is open-ended; its ultimate meaning remains largely unknown. However, we *do know* that the Iraq war has blatantly exposed the inherent contradictions of our imagined wartime Athenian democracy, that illusory scenario in which a collectivistic motive to soldierly sacrifice is possible.

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the PNAC—including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, I Lewis Libby, William J. Bennett, Zalmay Khalizad (President Bush's ambassador to Afghanistan), and Jeb Bush—released a public statement that argued four broad points (Statement):

- We need to increase defense spending significantly if we are to carry out our global responsibilities today and modernize our armed forces for the future.
- We need to strengthen our ties to democratic allies and to challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values.
- We need to promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad.
- We need to accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles.

In September 2000, the PNAC released a follow-up document that further detailed their plan. Titled Rebuilding America's Defenses, this 90-page document stated, "America's global leadership, and its role as the guarantor of the current great-power peace, relies upon the safety of the American homeland; the preservation of a favorable balance of power in Europe, the Middle East and surrounding energy-producing region, and East Asia; and the general stability of the international system of nation-states relative to terrorists, organized crime, and other 'non-state actors'" (5). This document, nearly a blueprint of what was to follow Bush's election, argued for a more permanent American role in Middle East regional security and hinted at war with Iraq: "While the unresolved conflicts with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein" (14). Dissatisfied with the Clinton Administration's adherence to certain international treaties (52) and the already lenient rules governing defense spending and private contracting, the document demanded an increase use of U.S. civilian contract workers (34), greater spending on global missile defenses (presumably to be constructed by private companies), an American control of space and cyberspace, and a sweeping transformation of the U.S. military's conventional forces into a swifter, more technology-dependent entity. The PNAC noted that this revolutionary transformation of U.S. defense and foreign policies was "likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor" (51).

[11] Evidence pointing towards an economic motive for the war in Iraq has yet to be conclusively substantiated. But counterarguments for a public motive have been rendered weak by the Bush Administration's intimate relationships with the PNAC and the private enterprises that have financially benefited from the conflict. On Wednesday March 19, 2003, just days before the commencement of the Iraq war, Defense Policy Board Chairman Richard Perle was paid to host a conference call with Goldman Sachs financial clients to discuss "investment opportunities arising from the war" (Dowd). Perle's talk—titled "Implications of an Imminent War: Iraq Now. North Korea Next?"—offered Goldman Sachs investors "advice on how to cash if war broke out in Iraq and/or North Korea" (Capital Hill Blue).

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