FROM: Phyllis Schlafly

68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 (618) 462-5415

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THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

Several months ago, I received a letter from Bob Hope asking me to contribute to build a memorial to pay tribute to all the veterans who served in the Vietnam War. I knew it was a form letter which went to millions of other people, but I read it because it was signed by Bob Hope.

The letter really tugged at my heart strings. Hope reminded us about the 57,692 Americans who died in the Vietnam War, the 300,000 wounded, the 100,000 seriously disabled, and the hundreds of thousands who were callously treated after they returned home.

I sent a contribution to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund because Bob Hope told me that the memorial selected to honor the Vietnam veterans would be "impressive and inspiring." I responded because he told me that the memorial would be an "appropriate way to unite all Americans" and would "instill pride in all Americans."

I just saw a newspaper picture of the proposed Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and I feel it was not accurately described in Bob Hope's letter. The memorial isn't "impressive" or "inspiring." It won't "instill pride in all Americans" or "unite all Americans." The memorial will reopen old wounds; and I think that the veterans who came back from Vietnam have suffered enough without a fresh indignity.

However, the important thing isn't what I think about it, but rather what Vietnam veterans think about it. And many of them feel insulted by it.

They think it looks like a memorial to the anti-Vietnam agitators rather than to the men who served honorably after their country asked them. Thomas Carhart, a 1966 West Point graduate who was twice decorated for service in the Vietnam War, calls it "a black trench of shame and sorrow." He said, "It's a memorial to Jane Fonda, not to those of us who served in Vietnam."

I realize that artistic tastes differ and that Bob Hope didn't select the winning design. But even the Washington Post described the memorial as "a black rift in the earth" and noted its "subtle symbolism" in representing the "ambiguous Vietnam trauma."

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The design calls for two 200-foot-long black granite walls joined together to form an open "V." Since the ground will be level with the top of the back of the wall, and the grass on the front side will be sunken to a depth of ten feet, it looks like a black retaining wall holding up a nonlevel piece of earth.

The names of the 57,692 who died in the Vietnam War will be inscribed on the wall. That's all; nothing more. There will be no mention of the Vietnam War, or America, or the Flag, or honorable service and sacrifice. This memorial will disfigure the grassy Mall in Washington, not honor our veterans.

The reason the memorial design is so disappointing is that the artists who entered the competition were given instructions for a theme very different from the tone of the fundraising letter sent out by Bob Hope. The letter sent to the artists said, "The memorial will make no political statement regarding the war or its conduct," and then followed that disclaimer by intensely political and divisive statements which have the rhetoric of anti-Vietnam agitators.

The brochure sent out to guide the thinking of those who would design the memorial talked about "the national tragedy of our involvement in Vietnam," called it "a tragic experience," and recalled "the bitter and seemingly unresolvable debate."

The jury that selected the design was made up entirely of persons who had no experience in Vietnam. No Vietnam veteran was permitted to vote on the design. On the other hand, it has been charged that four or perhaps five of the eight members of the jury were involved in some kind of protest against the Vietnam War.

The site chosen for the memorial, the Mall between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, was the site of the massive anti-Vietnam rallies. Some think that the new memorial might become the stage for anti-defense rallies of the future on which the Fondas and other actors would use our dead veterans to call forth visions of doom and hopelessness.

The American veterans who served in Vietnam and returned have suffered more than our servicemen in any war. If there is one thing we don't need, it's a piece of granite to reopen old wounds. If the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial invites divisiveness instead of healing, it should not be built.

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