

**'The Lincoln Memorial Was Too Crowded':**  
**Interpreting the United States' memorial landscape through film and television**

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Abstract

This article argues for a more rigorous understanding of the use of memorials in American film and television as part of the ongoing negotiation and development of American memory, looking beyond the disaster genre and The Lincoln Memorial to other structures of historical import and their deployment in popular media.

Keywords

United States; film; television; memorials; Vietnam Veterans Memorial; Korean War Veterans Memorial; Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial

In *Olympus Has Fallen* (Antoine Fuqua, 2013), the White House and much of Washington DC is destroyed by North Korean terrorists hellbent on triggering a global nuclear conflagration. At the outset, the Washington Monument is toppled by one of their planes damaged by the American counterattack. So far, such a moment would not be out of place in any action or disaster film of this nature, and recalls similar destruction in Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) and *2012* (2009). What is significant is the way the film dwells upon the destruction of this edifice despite it having little to no strategic or military importance: when the plane initially clips the monument as it careens to the ground, the camera looks up at it from the ground to emphasize its significant size. Once the plane has been destroyed, there is a cut to an aerial view of the monument with smoke emerging from the wound it has just endured. There is an eerie sense of calm as the shot lingers, but creaking, crumbling sounds quickly emerge on the diegetic soundtrack, followed by another low angle shot of the monument as it shatters. The editing here gathers pace, the disintegrating edifice shown from a variety of angles. The shots taken from the ground, featuring crowds running away from the falling structure, are obviously intended to recall the cascading debris of the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>,

2001, but what is curious is that the monument is not entirely destroyed. The majority of the structure remains, the towering shaft having been neutered somewhat [Figure 1], but the reaction from officials within the White House is clear: this is a calamity. Despite being only of symbolic significance, the wounding of the Washington Monument delivers a substantial blow to the nation's sense of self and, concomitantly, the power of the presidency – as it is dedicated to the nation's first president – and by association, masculinity (the phallic connotations of the structure hardly need reiteration).

This reading is reinforced by the fact that President Asher (Aaron Eckhardt), unlike his heroic counterparts in earlier presidential action films like *Air Force One* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1997) spends the majority of the film held captive by the terrorists. He is the object of rescue rather the subject of the response, and the decapitation (or castration) of the Washington Monument is significant symbolically of the neutralisation of American power, and the power of the presidency, in the early stages of the film. This reading is only supported by the fact that the end of the film, when the terrorists are finally defeated and the President rescued, the film feels the need to show that the Washington Monument is now under reconstruction: the nation's confidence, so inextricably linked with its manhood, is being rebuilt [Figure 2]. It perhaps seems absurd that a monument of no 'real' significance should be a priority for rebuilding in the aftermath of such a devastating attack, but it is crucial to the restorative, conservative nature of the disaster film that it should be. Indeed, it is crucial to the image of the nation itself: as Jeffrey F. Meyer argues of the president to whom the monument is dedicated, 'Washington is important to Americans as their central figure of self-understanding, the mythic embodiment of the ideals Americans consider their highest and best' (146). Produced at a time when there is a palpable, myopic nostalgia for Washington and the other 'Founding Fathers', and the desire to make 'America great again', the destruction and subsequent rebuilding of the Washington Monument in *Olympus Has Fallen* is crucial to this process.

Monuments and memorials in the United States are fundamental to the nation's ongoing construction of its identity. They function as a means by which

citizens understand, celebrate and mourn the nation's past, fulfilling what Kirk Savage describes as a 'deep need for attachment that can be met only in a real place, where the imagined community actually materializes and the existence of the nation is confirmed in a simple but powerful way' (4). Albert Boime argued that America's monuments 'pose as shrines to national ideas, and in reinforcing these ideals, affect ... consciousness and behaviour.' (7) In essence, these icons are exploited by the state to organize national memory. Those who try to control our understanding of history in this way, become what Boime described as 'regulators of the social memory and hence of social conscience.' (9) And it is, of course, not only the state that does this. As Boime identifies briefly, monuments and memorials serve as 'symbolic centrepieces of Hollywood movies' (6). However, he does not delve deeply into the meanings behind these artistic interventions or the contexts that produced them. More recently, Erika Doss has begun to address these questions, arguing that the obsession with using ruined monuments in disaster films like *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968), *Logan's Run* (Michael Anderson, 1976) and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) might be interpreted as metaphors: 'Abandoned memorials are metaphors for an abandoned nation; vandalized memorials signify national instability and imminent collapse ... ruined national memorials symbolize anxieties about a ruined national body.' (57)

The functions that monuments and memorials play in film and television have, these kinds of casual observations aside, been largely ignored by scholars. This area demands further investigation in order to understand how moving image media operate in the ongoing process of memorialisation, to determine what role such images play in the constitution of cultural and national memory. Such considered attention has only been paid to the Lincoln Memorial, the appearance in cinema of which has been the predominant focus of scholars. Indeed, Ian Scott argues that it was the Lincoln Memorial's presence in cinema – particularly in the 1939 films *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* and *Young Mr Lincoln* – that 'established the memorial as the pre-eminent site of political affiliation for Americans, even though at this point it was only seventeen years old' (27). In this regard, cinema has played a vital role in The Lincoln Memorial's growth in symbolic significance: as a welcome

buttress to national identity and democratic values in the midst of the Great Depression and on the cusp of World War II in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (Schleier, 452-68), as highlighting the disjuncture between the nation's ideals and its reality when Richard Nixon is faced by angry Vietnam protestors in the marble temple in Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995), and, more recently, establishing a playful, postmodern image of Lincoln as the wise-cracking, truth-telling statue come to life in Shawn Levy's *Night at the Museum 2* (2009). This is not really surprising as these are the dominant strains in which monuments and memorials have been employed in film and television production: action, disaster and science-fiction films use monuments to offer a shorthand for national destruction and crisis, while the Lincoln Memorial is used as a shorthand to recall the nation's highest ideals and greatest achievements, as a symbol to which one should turn in an hour of grave danger.

But what of the other monuments and memorials that dot the American landscape? Have they ever been represented in cinema and television, and how? What do they have to say, if anything, about the state of the nation? Why has the Lincoln Memorial received such steady focus from film and television producers (and scholars), and yet the plethora of other monuments and memorials been largely ignored? These questions begin to find their answers in *The Simpsons*, in an episode in which the patriotic and idealistic young Lisa Simpson enters an essay contest in Washington DC and, like her predecessor Jefferson Smith in Capra's 1939 classic *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, discovers corruption at the heart of the nation's capital. Like Smith, she goes to visit Lincoln for answers, but he is inundated with pilgrims desperately seeking wisdom, advice and solace, and she cannot make herself heard above the din. Instead, she visits the Jefferson Memorial [Figure 3]. Jefferson vents his fury at Lisa, lamenting the fact that he is consistently ignored in favour of Lincoln. He seeks to convince Lisa that he is similarly worthy of such frequent visitation, citing his status as the primary author of the Declaration of Independence. This exchange prompted the question as to why this memorial to such a significant figure in US history would receive comparatively short shrift in film and television. The memorial has featured infrequently: in Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*

(1951), its isolated position on the far edge of the Tidal Basin that makes it an ideal location for the suspense thriller. In *Bob Roberts* (1992), Tim Robbins' mockumentary about the rise of a demagogue to the US senate, the diegetic filmmaker chronicling Roberts' rise to power spends time at the Jefferson Memorial lamenting the discrepancy between the nation's ideals and its tawdry reality. But visits to Jefferson in film and television are, despite his historical importance, few and far between.

As the historical record remains contested, and cultural memory is fought over and challenged, we must look to popular media as arenas in which such arguments and anxieties are worked through. However, as *The Simpsons* reveals, film and television have played such a major role in the development of the Lincoln Memorial as the primary site of identification for Americans that it has become almost oversaturated with meaning (to the point of parody and ridicule), and has forced the other monuments and memorials, many of which are similarly significant, into the background. In order to redress the balance, , these somewhat ignored structures and their mediation in mainstream film and television demand examination, in order to determine how popular culture reflects, critiques and works through other aspects of American history: prominent figures, but also conflicts either triumphant or troublesome. Through the analysis of three primary examples, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982), the Korean War Veterans Memorial (1995) and the memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1997), an assessment will be made of the roles film and television play in establishing and reinforcing, or complicating and undermining, the meanings of these structures.

### The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and *To Heal a Nation, In Country* and *The X-Files*

Dedicated in 1982 after a long and controversial commission and design process, The Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington D.C. is unlike every other monument to conflict in the capital [**Figure 4**]. Consisting of large slabs of reflective black marble scored into the ground and featuring the names of every American soldier killed or missing in Vietnam (in chronological order), the monument's aesthetics are indicative of the intention to commemorate the soldiers

and mourn their loss, but avoid making any explicit political statement about a conflict that remained divisive, especially given that it had ended in a defeat from which, arguably, the United States has never recovered. As Marita Sturken argues,

The memorial functions in opposition to the codes of remembrance evidenced on the Washington Mall. Virtually all the national memorials and monuments in Washington are made of white stone and designed to be visible from a distance. In contrast, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial cuts into the sloping earth: it is not visible until one is almost upon it; if approached from behind, it seems to disappear into the landscape (46).

According to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, whose leader Jan Scruggs had been wounded in the conflict, the memorial was conceived 'as a means to promote the healing and reconciliation of the country after the divisions caused by the war ... Americans of all political persuasions and opinions regarding the rightness of the national policy in Vietnam may express their acknowledgment of the sacrifice of those who served there.' (qtd. in Hagopian, 83). The intention of the memorial was the reconciliation of the divisions caused by the war, to remember the nation's unrecognized heroes, to rehabilitate by healing the wounds of rejection by society, and renew national pride. Scruggs was inspired by Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), a film that played an important role in rehabilitating the image of the Vietnam veteran in American culture and society. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz argue, 'Earlier films about Vietnam had depicted the war's alienating effects; this film did the opposite: it portrayed the common man's continued devotion to his country, despite personal tragedy, and so affirmed his right to the country's admiration.' (390). In keeping with this, Scruggs wanted the Memorial to in part acknowledge the difficult homecoming experience many veterans had suffered, forming a significant part of the rehabilitation of the image of the Vietnam veteran that occurred, thanks in no small part to President Ronald Reagan's recodification of the war as a noble cause, in American culture throughout the 1980s (Hagopian, 15).

However, the controversy surrounding the design of the memorial threatened to overshadow its purpose. As Boime notes, critics of the memorial viewed its design – black marble carved into the ground – as an acknowledgment that the war itself was

wrong; that it gave credence to the views of the people who protested against it. As Kristin Ann Hass (1998) argues, Maya Lin's design was 'dubbed "the black gash of shame"', its shape was considered an affront to veteran and conservative manhood especially when compared to the shape of the neighboring Washington Monument ... the black stone was more mournful than heroic. It seemed to many too clear an admission of defeat.' (15) Indeed, as Sturken notes, 'to its critics, the antiphallus symbolized the open wound of this country's castration in an unsuccessful war, a war that "emasculated" the United States.' (53) The memorial's design was seen as reinforcing the conventional, highly problematic narrative of the Vietnam War as a humiliating, 'feminising' experience for the nation and those who fought in it. The angst it generated resulted in the addition of more traditional elements to the design after its initial dedication, with the "Three Soldiers" constructed to offer a more literal, more celebratory and affirmative vision of heroism, militarism and masculinity. This addendum to Lin's original structure conforms largely to what Susan Jeffords (1989) has described as the 'remasculinization of America' during Reagan's presidency, restoring the Vietnam veteran's position within the narrative of nation. The memorial, the controversy and arguments surrounding it, and the additions and amendments made at later dates are metaphorical for the position of the war itself in the American psyche: as Hass (1998) suggests, the story of the memorial 'is one of struggle over the representation of contested terrain. It is an allegory for the Vietnam War itself and the ways in which the war has stayed alive in American culture since the fall of Saigon.' (3).

Two mediations of the memorial in American film and television conform to the stated intention to provide closure to veterans of the conflict, and perpetuate the drive during the 1980s to, as Hagopian argues, 'articulate a new discourse about Vietnam veterans: a sentimental and personalized discourse in which the key idea was that veterans had been misjudged and misunderstood by the public.' (18). It is perhaps unsurprising that *To Heal a Nation* (Michael Pressman, 1988), a film made for television based on Scruggs's book about the experience of bringing the memorial to fruition, should do this. The film, exploring the memorial's tortuous journey to completion, concludes with its dedication, in which veterans and the bereaved

interact with the wall, touching names of friends who fell in battle, and reuniting and embracing those who did not [Figure 5]. The sequence is cathartic, as veterans of the conflict reunite through their common trauma and tearfully acknowledge their reincorporation into the narrative of the nation from which they had felt largely omitted. Scruggs is acknowledged as having 'done good' by helping these men and women come to terms with what happened, and the film concludes with the American flag reflected in the wall's black marble [Figure 6], restoring a conflict that had sat uncomfortably and problematically outside America's image of itself into the best the nation could achieve: male camaraderie, national unity, reverence and respect for those who have died in wars fought in the name of the nation, however they were conducted or whatever the outcome. In so doing, *To Heal a Nation* reinforces entirely the 'official verdict' of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: "Let the Memorial begin the healing process and forever stand as a symbol of national unity." While Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz note this rhetoric reflected 'an ideal, not a reality' (378), I contend that films like *To Heal a Nation* perform crucial cultural labour, beginning the process of binding the wounds opened by the conflict, securing the war's position within the narrative of nation, and confirming the Memorial's position as the site through which this idealism could become reality.

This work is continued in *In Country* (Norman Jewison, 1989), which is even less subtle in its reinforcing of the dominant meaning of the memorial, and reincorporating the Vietnam veteran into the national fold: the film tells the story of a group of veterans in small-town Kentucky who have returned from the war but are largely ignored by society. One man, Emmett Smith (Bruce Willis), is helped by his young niece Samantha (Emily Lloyd), whose father died in the war before she was born, come to terms with what happened in Vietnam. Emmett bears all the hallmarks of a man with post-traumatic stress disorder, as he has traumatic flashbacks and is frightened of thunderstorms. He is also feminized during the film, and wears a sarong at various points throughout, for which he is routinely mocked. He is, to all intents and purposes, the stereotype of the Vietnam veteran: psychologically obliterated, his manhood under scrutiny, Smith is discarded by the community in which he lives. At the conclusion of the film, Emmett travels to

Washington DC with Emily and her grandmother to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in search of catharsis. Samantha touches her father's name, and in so doing is able to find closure; Emmett sheds tears for his fallen friends and is renewed. Striding towards the phallic Washington Monument in the film's final moments, Emmett states a desire for barbecue [Figure 7]. Traditional masculinity has been restored through encounter with the memorial the critics of which denigrated as 'feminising' the Vietnam veteran, but whose stated aim was to provide a sounding board in order to recover and heal. What is important here is that Emmett's encounter with the wall enables him to leave the war behind, and return to mainstream society and conventional masculinity. Indeed, the film's final shot lingers on the Washington Monument bathed in the glow of late-afternoon sunshine as the credits roll, for far longer than it dwelt upon the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In many ways it both reaffirms the intention of the Memorial to offer the cultural space to remember the war, but turns away as soon as the requisite healing process has concluded. In so doing, *In Country* functions as the concluding point to a decade in which the image of the Vietnam veteran was shifted 'away from themes of victimization and psychosis' to a position of 'warrior hero' (Haines, 82-3).

Indeed, both *To Heal a Nation* and *In Country* provide largely uncomplicated stories of renewal; the memorial enables straightforward resolution of the problems which the veterans have suffered and fulfils its complex function to acknowledge the divisive and open-ended nature of the conflict while simultaneously returning those who fought in it to the national fold. In many senses, both films' use of the Memorial 'resolves' the Vietnam War in the national psyche.

Complicating this comfortable cleansing of the psychological damage the war wrought upon the nation's conscience, *The X-Files* employs the Memorial as a structuring presence of an episode from its fourth season in which a ceremony to rededicate the structure is placed under threat by the mysterious death of a general at the hands of an apparently invisible assailant. The phantom in question is American soldier Nathaniel Teager, a Rambo-esque killing machine who was left for dead in Vietnam, but has supposedly returned from beyond the grave to avenge the

deaths of his comrades. In reality, he was never dead – he had been held captive in a Vietnamese POW camp since the 1970s - but has now developed the ability to hide in plain sight, effectively placing himself in the “blind spot” of human vision in order to kill his victims. The episode’s premise invokes a couple of myths that have circulated around the war in Vietnam since its conclusion: that the American government abandoned some of its soldiers in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975, and that America only lost the war because somehow her soldiers were denied the opportunity to win it by the incompetence of the military establishment (an attitude most vividly expressed in popular culture by John Rambo’s question when sent back to Vietnam to rescue these mythical POWs, “Do we get to win this time?”) More than this, however, the episode reaffirms the complex place the Vietnam War continues to occupy in American memory: using the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as its point of engagement with this politically problematic and culturally sensitive history, ‘Unrequited’ seeks both to fulfil the intention of the memorial to restore and honour the memory of those who fought in the war, while acknowledging that the wounds that the war created have not yet healed. As Doss argues, ‘As a much hated-war of defeat, Vietnam does not settle well in a standard ‘American historical metanarrative’ of popular triumphant militarism. ... Vietnam was when America “lost its way.”’ (239) Crucially, in relation to *The X-Files*’ construction of Vietnam veteran as vengeful and malevolent ghost, and its use of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a site through which to confront the suppurating wound that the conflict has left on the national landscape, ‘Vietnam won’t go away. Its ghosts still haunt the American psyche.’ (Ernest Lefever, qtd. in Doss, 239).

This dual intention is apparent from the episode’s beginning. The memorial (or, more accurately, a replica) is shown in the opening shot of the episode. Crucially, it is figured with the Washington Monument and Capitol Building in the background [Figure 8]. Although the memorial was conceived in direct opposition to these kinds of structures, ‘Unrequited’ nonetheless seeks to position it within the same continuum of American history, and part of its identity rather than a curious anomaly. In this sense the episode sets out to reinforce the project of the memorial to rehabilitate the Vietnam veteran. However, the further uses of the memorial

throughout the episode emphasize its reflective, sombre nature, demonstrating that its original intention – to heal the wound – has not been achieved.

The memorial is figured as a desolate and haunting place under a leaden sky; the music, as is typical of *The X-Files* more generally, carries tones of suspicion, doubt and threat. The choice to reflect the American flag (which is shown throughout the episode) in the black marble hammers home the traumatic connotations the Vietnam War continues to have on the American psyche [Figure 9]: the Wall reflects an image of the United States, but it is a dark and disturbing one, entirely at odds with the clean, masculine triumphalism of the other monuments in the capital, the ones that offer no challenge to the image of the United States as a benign and virtuous superpower.

The episode is structured around the idea of ‘seeing’ as traumatic: Teager’s ability to appear and disappear at will causes the eyes of those who see him to bleed. As the first of these instances occurs at the Memorial itself, this suggests the “wound” in the earth opened up by Lin’s structure has not healed. Teager confronts the “widow” of a fellow soldier to return her husband’s dog-tags and telling her, despite what she has been told, her husband is alive and a prisoner of war. Shortly after, a blood vessel in her eye ruptures and she begins to bleed. The episode, in rather crude fashion it must be admitted, suggests that to look at the legacy of the Vietnam War is so troubling and traumatic that the wounds will manifest themselves physically.

The way in which the episode concludes is crucial to the establishment of this critique. Teager is, ultimately, killed and the other generals whom he had targeted are rescued. Typically for *The X-Files*, which both reflected and perhaps defined the period’s profound mistrust of government, the case is covered up by an establishment that does not want to admit that they left soldiers to die in Vietnam, nor reveal why and how Teager was capable of appearing and disappearing at will. In order to emphasize this lack of closure, the episode’s final scene takes place at the memorial where FBI Assistant Director and Vietnam veteran Walter Skinner tells Mulder that the case is over and they must forget what they know. The final shot,

featuring a slow-zoom into a close-up of Skinner's face as he gazes at Teager's name on the Wall, underscored by the ghostly music used throughout the episode now tinged with a militaristic drumbeat, leaves the impression that the questions raised by the Vietnam War about American society and identity remain unanswered. While the films from *The Deer Hunter* in 1978 to *Born on the Fourth of July* in 1989, of which *To Heal a Nation* and *In Country* are two lesser-known examples, conclude in conservative fashion with the Vietnam veteran returned to the national fold (partially reflecting the Reaganite project to do so), *The X-Files*, in keeping with its tone and style, disrupts this formulation somewhat: as Mulder says of the cover-up of the Teager case, 'They're not just denying his denying this man's life, they're denying his death.' Despite the memorial's intention to commemorate the veterans rather than the war itself, it is clear that 'Unrequited' concludes in a way that expands this mission: while it commemorates the soldiers through Skinner's tacit acknowledgment of his relationship to Teager as a fellow veteran, it also suggests perhaps that the cover-up of Teager's case is indicative of the continued inability to face up to the traumatic legacy of the conflict. The memorial may have begun the healing process, but the nation's eyes continue to bleed.

#### The Korean War Veterans Memorial and *The West Wing*

If The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was conceived in opposition to the statues dedicated to Presidents Washington and Lincoln, so the Korean War Veterans Memorial, commissioned in 1986 and eventually dedicated in 1995, was in part established as a riposte to the dark, mournful, reflective VVM. Similar in the sense that it remembers the soldiers generally and not the war in particular, the original concept of the KWVM placed considerably more emphasis on heroism in combat. The designers, according to Kristin Hass (2013) 'sought an anti-wall', a memorial that was 'not abstract, not about grief, not about loss, not about tragedy, not about the nation imagined by the Vietnam Memorial' (30).

However, as a result, the memorial is curiously non-specific; the Korean War is often dubbed "The Forgotten War"; in popular culture, it has not captured the imagination in the same way as Vietnam, and there are very few films, and even

fewer well-regarded ones, that represent it (McCann, 66). As Christine Knauer notes, veterans of the Korean War 'all too often felt "sandwiched" ... between the "Greatest Generation" of the Second World War and the tragic figure of the Vietnam veteran.' (154). Added to this, the fact that the war ended in an 'anticlimactic armistice' meant it could never be celebrated or remembered as a 'clear and heroic American triumph' (154). In keeping with this attitude, the eventual memorial to the conflict makes little attempt to remember in specific terms, conforming to the revisionist approach to the conflict during the 1990s that sought to 'focus more on the sacrifices made by the participants than on the ideological issues' that caused the war to be fought in the first place (Landon, 84). Taking the form of a triangle, the memorial features archival images representing the land, sea and air troops who fought sandblasted onto the black granite walls that surround nineteen stainless steel statues representing a squad on patrol, with representatives of each branch of the armed forces **[Figure 10]**. One of the walls commemorates the United Nations soldiers who fought, and a nearby plaque lists the numbers killed, wounded and missing in action, along with the inscription 'Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met.' As Schwartz and Bayma argue of the memorial, '[it] resolves in stone the contradictions and confusions of the nation that erected it.' (950).

Despite the slavish attention to detail, the war's purpose, outcome and context are largely ignored, its status as the first proxy conflict of the Cold War and the fact that the war resulted in a stalemate that has never been resolved are not mentioned, nor does it remember the nation for which, and in which, it was fought. As Hass suggests,

The country and the people remain unnamed and therefore unknown. ... The war to be remembered was an American war fought by American troops, and the role of the United Nations got precious little mention. Korea, communism, the millions of Koreans killed, and the Cold War also received hardly a passing mention. (26, 35)

The central idea behind the memorial was to honour service, to celebrate the fight for freedom, and for the memorial to, as Doss notes, 'act as a corrective to the abstraction, the ambiguity, and the grief represented at the Vietnam Veterans

Memorial' (29). In the post-Cold War, post-conscription context, why that service was required, and to what end, are not considered significant. The intention was to 'simplify and domesticate war and military service', making it palatable again, breaching the fissure that some Americans felt between their love of the nation and their hatred of the military, and attempting to reconstruct the complex image of benign, but militarized, nationalism that had been blown apart by the ways in which the Vietnam War was waged (29). In so doing, the completed memorial rather closes off the kinds of dialogue and reflection that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has engendered; the possibility for personal connection with the monument that Lin's design enabled is altered here to wallow in generalities, allowing any global implications the conflict in Korea may have had to recede, comfortingly, out of sight. As Bayma and Schwartz note, six months after the Memorial's dedication it was decreed to have fulfilled its purpose: to convey 'the willingness to serve in a citizens army which lies at the heart of our democracy' (962).

One might say that the benign nationalism sought by the Korean War Veterans Memorial is the essence of *The West Wing*. While it is often celebrated for its determinedly liberal vision, it is just as much about reconstructing a compelling image of the United States as an exceptional nation of noble intention and purity of heart. Its first season Christmas episode, 'In Excelsis Deo', is one of the programme's very early expressions of this construct. While the episode features numerous competing narrative strands, at its centre is the story of a homeless Korean War Veteran, who dies of exposure on a bench next to the memorial. White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff) is called to the scene because the man was wearing a coat of his that he had donated to charity. Toby, noticing the tattoo on the man's arm that identifies him as a veteran of the Korean War, is shocked at the indifference shown towards his death, and spends the remainder of the episode securing a full military funeral for him, in order to, as the memorial intends, honour his service and his sacrifice (and, perhaps, partially atone for the fact he had, as indicated by his homelessness, been abandoned by the nation for which he fought). Toby uses his White House connections to organize a funeral on Christmas Eve at Arlington Cemetery. At no point throughout the episode is

anything made of the specificity of the Korean War; like the memorial itself it is constructed precisely to bring the dead soldier back into the national fold.

A fundamental associated narrative strand here is President Bartlet's secretary Mrs Landingham's continued grief over the deaths of her twin boys in Vietnam. The story forms a fundamental part of the episode's attempt to commemorate military service in general terms. Mrs Landingham appears somewhat downhearted despite the holiday cheer being spread throughout the White House. She reveals to Charlie that this is because her boys had died on Christmas Eve, 1970, during a fire in Danang. While she outwardly rebukes Toby for organising the funeral of the homeless veteran, it is clear that she appreciates the gesture given her own sacrifice, and attends the funeral which occurs at the end of the episode. While the wars in Korea and Vietnam have fundamental differences, 'In Excelsis Deo' brings them together, and is concerned primarily with celebrating and honouring military service. This emphasis on generality is reinforced by the cut from the conversation between Charlie and Mrs Landingham to Toby gazing reflectively at the Korean War memorial [Figure 11], directly linking Mrs Landingham's story with the death of the homeless vet. In Toby's search for the dead man's family, he speaks to a member of Veterans Association working near the war memorial: Toby asks, "Are you a veteran?" The man replies, "Yeah." Toby shakes his hand, and wishes him a merry Christmas. No further questions are asked. Which war he is a veteran of is of no consequence; all that matters is that he served. It would be impossible to imagine a similar exchange being conducted in an episode focused on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial which, as demonstrated by *The X-Files*, is mournful, sombre, and whose structure around the names of the soldiers who died, emphasizes personal connection between mourners and mourned. The Korean War Veterans Memorial is vague and non-specific enough to allow for this kind of exchange.

The final scene of the episode confirms this intention: images of the homeless veteran's funeral at Arlington are cross-cut with the White House staff lining up at a carol service where 'The Little Drummer Boy' is sung. This scene constructs an image of the White House staff, and concomitantly, the nation, as united, but also

child-like, naively patriotic, innocent and pure of will and intention. Where the American flag in *The X-Files* was used to emphasize the lingering, traumatic effects of the Vietnam War on the United States, the traditional, ceremonial draping of the veteran's coffin is affirmative, placing him firmly within a nation that recognizes his sacrifice. Unlike *The X-Files*, which emphasizes the open wound that the Vietnam War continues to leave on the American psyche, *The West Wing* ties everything up in a neat little Christmas bow: the funeral of the homeless veteran and Mrs Landingham's attendance provide welcome closure to the conflicts of the past.

The tone is one of gratitude and, given the context in which the episode was produced, conforms to the widespread celebration in the late 1990s of 'The Greatest Generation' who had fought and died in World War II, addressed in film and television by *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*, and given expression by the gargantuan World War II Memorial which now takes pride of place on the National Mall. Had it been built at the time, it is not impossible to imagine a similar episode of *The West Wing* taking place at the National World War II Memorial. Indeed, the positioning of the relatively new structure, between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial, is designed in some ways to complete the work of the Korean memorial, overwhelming the space and marginalising the memorial to Vietnam. The National World War II Memorial finishes the job, 'eras[ing] the conflicted meaning of the Vietnam War in American national consciousness and replac[ing] it with a simpler and unambiguous narrative of World War II, the "good war"' (Doss, 238). *The West Wing's* approach towards military conflict, at least in its pre-9/11 seasons, is similar, in many ways an attempt to expunge the divisiveness of the Vietnam War. It could be said that the Korean War Veterans Memorial and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of World War II veterans in the 1990s performs similar functions. Where there exists ambiguity, doubt, and conflict in *The X-Files*, *The West Wing* seeks clarity, certainty and closure. This is only possible because the Korean War Veterans Memorial is vague and ill-defined; it does not invite challenge or critique in the way the Vietnam Veterans Memorial does. It is only in this way that it can function as a restorative memorial, providing timely reinforcement to the United States' image of itself as a benign superpower.

## The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial and *House of Cards*

*House of Cards* (2012- ) represents the most sustained contemporary meditation on the nature of political power in the United States. Emerging at a time of bitter partisanship and anxiety about the decline of the nation as a great power, the substance of this critique appears to revolve around a lament: it is more difficult than it once was to wield political power effectively and with purpose; one has to commit heinous and atrocious acts to achieve power and remain there; a sense of impermanence and transience pervades the American political scene because of the hysterical, attention-deficit media and a system that requires constant fundraising and campaigning for re-election. This is captured effectively in the show's title sequence, which shows a city founded upon noble ideals, its self-confident and self-righteous image rendered in marble, being quickly consumed by shadow. Cloaking the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument in darkness suggests we should be wary of, rather than enamoured with, these potent symbols of American democracy. More than this, these stone structures remain fixed, immovable, permanent, while the mortal souls below speed in circles through the city's concrete veins.

Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) believes himself to be capable of transcending this whirling vortex to achieve true power, to become one of the 'stone buildings' that watches over the city. The show's first two seasons indulge this delusion of grandeur as Underwood proceeds towards ultimate power in a remorseless and ruthless fashion, and Underwood's obsession with becoming one of these stone statues is underlined by his disparaging remarks about Remy Danton, his former press secretary who left the public sector to become a corporate lobbyist:

He chose money over power. In this town, a mistake nearly everyone makes. Money is the McMansion in Sarasota that starts falling apart after ten years, power is the old stone building that stands for centuries. I cannot respect someone who does not see the difference.

Underwood clearly considers himself worthy of such a position. He pursues far-reaching reform of education and welfare, and in the third season when he is President, puts forward a programme called 'America Works', loosely modelled on

Roosevelt's New Deal, to secure employment for citizens without jobs. However, not only is the programme a bastardized version of Roosevelt's, it also encounters relentless and hostile opposition that Underwood appears to have no hope of thwarting. Therefore, what is intriguing is that *House of Cards* positions the 'old stone buildings' that dot the landscape of Washington DC as icons of the nation's former glories: it is readily apparent that nobody, Underwood included, will be one day rendered in marble, fixing their gaze on the hustle and bustle of politics. As the promotional material for the show's first season attests, Underwood may envision himself as Lincoln (with blood on his hands), sitting on his throne and surveying all before him, but he remains flesh and blood. The nature of political power in the contemporary period is of furious speed, chaos and continual crisis management. There is little or no opportunity to 'build' something long-lasting, even permanent.

Which is why, when Underwood goes to visit the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial [Figure 12] along the capital's Tidal Basin as he considers the America Works programme and his faltering marriage, it is impossible to view the scene without noting the obvious disjuncture between the rhetoric and imagery of the memorial, and Underwood and the nature of contemporary political power: America's greatness exists in its past and its future will be blighted by the frenetic, sordid and violent failures that characterize *House of Cards*. As he gazes at the statue, and ponders the distance between FDR and his wife, Eleanor, at the memorial (she is tucked away to one side to commemorate her involvement with the early United Nations, another similarity between the Roosevelts and the Underwoods as Claire becomes UN ambassador during her husband's administration), Underwood acknowledges that if he is to become one of the 'stone statues', he will need to heal the distance between himself and his wife, whose support is so crucial to his presidency. What he does not appear to acknowledge, however, is that the nature of the presidency and political power has changed to such an extent that he is unlikely to ever achieve this transcendence.

The example of *House of Cards* provides an effective summation of the issues examined here. . Monuments and memorials, despite their apparent immutable

permanence, are part of a continually evolving image of the United States, its politics and society. What they mean shifts and alters according to context, but also how the memorial is represented, why and for whom. The dominant meaning can be disrupted, the structure deployed to articulate contemporary anxieties about the state of the nation. Underwood's visit to Roosevelt's memorial in *House of Cards*, forms a crucial component of the programme's critique of contemporary political power as impermanent, messy and compromised. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, all constructed in the past thirty-five years, have been utilised in films and television programmes in ways that both reinforce and undermine their intended meanings. Where the predominant tendency in film and television appears to be to employ the memorials and monuments as a means to look back longingly for a time in which the United States was more stable, prosperous and secure, to celebrate leaders whose shortcomings have been erased by their immortalisation in marble and stone, there remain isolated examples of reflection and critique, as evidenced by *The X-Files*. Monuments and memorials are a cultural shorthand, but that does not mean their deployment in popular media undermines their complexity, or uncomplicatedly serves the *status quo*. The tendency to understand the presentation of monuments and memorials solely in the ways they are most often imagined must be avoided: these structures do not function only as fodder for the scenes of spectacular destruction that dominate popular blockbuster cinema. Whenever they are deployed in film and television, however seldom or fleeting, monuments and memorials speak of the concerns of the society that presents them, even as the structures themselves remain rigid, inscrutable, and silent.

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