



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**America's Capital:
Memorial Day at the National Mall**

Memorial Day at the National Mall Report One

Dateline: Any Memorial Day, but for now: 2014.

I wrote the essay below nine years ago. After re-reading this essay, with the exception of a few topical comments, it is as timely now as it was in 2005. I have posted a short addendum to this essay, as well as additional comments interspersed in this report.

Memorial Day, May 30, 2005

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, reporting from the National Mall in Washington, DC on Memorial Day, 2005. Today, we are going to visit several war memorials in and around our nation's capital city. As a reminder, Memorial Day, a legal holiday, is observed on the last Monday in May to honor the nation's armed services personnel killed in wartime.

Memorial Day is a day when even anti-American Americans can feel patriotic without feeling guilty about living in a country that allows them to live free and affluent lives---while they castigate the very reasons they are so-privileged. Therefore, Memorial Day is a great day in America for both blue-lined or red-lined citizens.

I am patriotic because I have witnessed the alternatives to a republican state. I have lived in places that don't have it. I've fought in places that don't possess it. Take it from a middle of the road person on the political spectrum, there is no better alternative than a powerful electorate (a republic), which has free and equal rights to participate in a system of government (a democracy). Certainly, other countries are republics and democracies. But given humans' long history, America's successful political process is rare.

Revisionism or Correcting Inaccuracies?

During this holiday, I have also been thinking about some history books I have read the past few years. They focus on how immoral, bigoted, and downright unattractive our founding fathers were. One of my nephews told me they were not much more than, "dead white men." And he (as well as those dead, white men were) is an intelligent, thoughtful man.

No question, many of our founding fathers exploited the white underclass and kept slaves for even more repressive exploitation. So did many others in those days. If you or I had been born in 1740, I suspect we would have taken on the values of those times. That is, unless we had been born with the knowledge that we have in 2005 (2014 note: I was referring to the majority of Western World citizens, not groups, such as the kidnapers in Nigeria, and sadly, many other parts of the world.)

How is that done? I leave this to the experts in Washington, DC, but there are a lot of respected historians now engaged in the practice of writing of their disdain for men who undertook the most dangerous and difficult task of their lives.

Consider what our founding fathers did. Most of them were landed, high-ranking gentlemen. They possessed wealth. They yielded immense power. They enjoyed the status of respected

gentry. Many had close ties to England. They risked losing it all. I don't question that many of their motives were base, profit-driven, and focused on gaining power. I don't deny that some of them were venal, others ego-obsessed. How could they be otherwise? After all, they were humans.

In the final analysis, it does not matter if John Adams was pompous (which he was), that George Washington wore his uniform for selfish self-promotion (which he did), or that Thomas Jefferson showed back stabbing qualities (which he had). In the long run, these men created America's Republic. So, on this Memorial Day holiday, let's give these "dead white men" the credit they deserve: Knowing they would be going to war to put at risk what they did not have to put at risk.

My point of this part of my report, and my reflection on Memorial Day, is to ask each of us to remember that with all the faults of our country, and with all the faults of our ancestors, our country is still trying to make democracy work.

Am I worried that we might fail? I am. Much of what democracy attempts to do runs counter to the nature of humans' dispositions. That's why, in a rare moment of clarity, humans decided to create governments to reign-in aspects of our nasty behavior.

Forgive my meanderings. Memorial Day brings out serious thoughts from this war veteran. So, let's head for Constitution Avenue in Washington, DC to take part in a Memorial Day celebration.

Memorial Day at the National Mall Report Two

On Memorial Day of 2005, I am walking around Constitution Avenue and the National Mall of Washington, DC.

Washington, DC is a grand city. I have been living in this area since 1966 (in adjacent Arlington, Virginia), and I worked in the “District” for over ten years. As I have grown older, I have come to appreciate many of Washington’s assets. One is its skyline, or more telling, its absence of a skyline. Washington, DC is one of the few (maybe only) national capitals that place a restriction on the style and height of the buildings that can be built within and adjacent to its city limits.

Paris is losing its once beautiful absence of a skyline (what else can we call it?). So are many other cities. Washington, DC is not. To demonstrate, I snapped the picture in Figure 1 from my car as I was driving from my Virginia home into the District.



Figure 1. The Washington, DC skyline---or lack thereof.

Granted, the photo is taken at a low height. Nonetheless, another position (Figure 2) at the 14th Street Bridge that connects DC to Virginia reveals that the Washington, DC skyline is not a skyline in the conventional urban sense. No skyscrapers. Boring? Perhaps, and I like skyscrapers. I find skyscraper skylines stimulating and interesting to behold. At the same time, I am thankful a city or two in this world has kept the skyscrapers at bay.



Figure 2. Another view.

War Memorials

If I am in Washington, each Memorial Day I try to visit the war memorials. Today, I spent several hours at the National Mall where most of the memorials are located. If you have not visited this part of our country, I would recommend you put it on your list of things to do. The experience will probably be one you will never forget. In addition, the Mall is a very pleasant place unto itself. It contains the famous reflecting pool and other ponds, with hundreds of magnificent, large trees. Figure 3 shows some of the scenery.



Figure 3. The Mall's ponds.

Today, DC is stuffed with people. They are concentrated at the Vietnam War Memorial and other war memorials on the Mall. Nearby is the Korean War Memorial. So is the new World War II Memorial. A few blocks away is the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Within view (and walking distance) are the Washington Monument and Lincoln and Jefferson memorials.

I was under-dressed for my visit to the War Memorials. I had no cap, hat, T-shirt, pin, or insignia identifying me as a War vet. My T-shirt proclaimed a modest feat. It stated I was associated with the "University of New Mexico." In contrast, it appeared most veterans advertised their former occupation. For example, Figure 4 shows a veteran with his T-shirt.



Figure 4. Coming out of the closet.

As I watched the crowd at the Mall, I realized our nation had turned the corner on its attitude toward Vietnam veterans. Perhaps this change came about long ago, but for the past twenty-five years, I have been somewhat isolated from America's mainstream culture---ignoring the goings-on around me while I wrote about computer networks.

Cultural isolation has its advantages: I recognize almost no faces on a *People* magazine cover. Reading *Parade*'s "Personality Profile" is like reading a profile on anonymous personalities from the Missing Persons Bureau. Splendid isolation from the Paris Hiltons of the world---even though she's hard to miss (2014 addendum/correction: And I do not want to miss her. She is a good-looking, savvy woman.) Anyway, I realized it was now OK to be publicly identified as a Viet Vet.

How things change. Upon my return from Asia in 1966, while sitting in a bar in Los Angeles, I was insulted for wearing my uniform. Several patrons made references to my being a killer and threw peanuts at me. Thankfully, those days seem to be over. With minor exceptions, today our armed forces personnel are given respect, regardless of our political inclinations.

In the next and last report, we will visit six war memorials on the Mall: the World War II Memorial, the Korean War Memorial, the Women's Veterans Vietnam Memorial, the Frederick Hart, Vietnam Memorial, and the Maya Lin, Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall (the black granite wall). We finish the report with a visit to the Iwo Jima Memorial in Virginia.

Memorial Day at the National Mall Report Three

The last segment of this report takes us to several war memorials on the Mall in Washington, DC and the Iwo Jima Memorial in Virginia.

WW II Memorial

The latest addition to the Mall's memorials is the World War II Memorial. Figure 5 shows a part of this memorial. As you can see, water is a central theme in its design. This memorial has received considerable criticism from architects and landscape experts. On this Memorial Day, I saw it for the first time and I do not understand what the fuss is all about. It's dignified. It's under-stated. It does not intrude onto other memorials, monuments, or the Mall itself. If you visit the memorial, I would like your opinion on it.



Figure 5. World War II Memorial.

Wars, Conflicts, or Police Actions?

Some of the memorials described in this report are identified as simply Memorials and not *War* Memorials. For example, the Korean incident was not a war. It is called the Korean Conflict, or the Korean Police Action. Nor was the Vietnam thing a war. It is called the Vietnam Conflict. The memorials reflect this odd practice.

Conflicts? Police actions? Husbands and wives have conflicts and some couples engage in police actions against one another. Siblings have conflicts. Politicians have conflicts. Nations have conflicts. But they also have wars.

The word *conflict* is appropriate if two nations are debating a point in the United Nations. If they are killing-off portions of each other's population, I think the word *war* is appropriate. But don't take it from this writer. Consult your dictionary or better yet, just ask your spouse.

2014 Addendum: Or more telling, a person finds himself/herself engaged in an Iraqi or Afghanistan *conflict*. He comes back with a missing leg with part of his mind not working, and

he is labeled as a casualty of a *conflict*. ...All to the end that Iraq and Afghanistan remain the same before he lost his leg and his mental balance.

Korean War Memorial

Next on my agenda was the Korean Memorial. Figure 6 provides a view from the front (the photo on the left) and the rear (the photo on the right).



Figure 6. Korean War Memorial.

This memorial is an eerie, brilliant creation. The faces of the statues look haunted. I have tried to capture the mood of this memorial in these photos, shown as Figure 7. Regardless of what you or I may think of war, regardless of our views on “good and necessary wars” or “bad and unnecessary” wars, I think we all can agree with a T-shirt proclamation I saw a few minutes ago: “War Sucks.” These men’s faces attest to this fact.



Figure 7. A close-up.

The Vietnam Women's Memorial

The Vietnam Women's Memorial is also located on the Mall, a short walking distance from the other Vietnam memorials. Figure 8 shows this memorial. This work, a bronze sculpture by Glenna Goodacre, was added to the Mall in 1993. The statue pays homage to the 11,000 women who served in the Vietnam War.

Most evident is the woman taking care of a fallen warrior. Behind them is a woman looking up to the sky. For what? Who knows? Ambulance helicopters coming to their aid? Rain to assuage their humid, hot bodies? Heaven? I suppose that is the purpose of her pose. It is open for question.

The purposeful ambiguity of art is one of its most intriguing qualities. Picasso said a piece of art should not be interpreted by the artist but the viewer.



Figure 8. Vietnam Veterans Memorial for Women.

The Frederick Hart Vietnam Memorial

Also nearby is a Vietnam Veterans memorial, shown in Figure 9. This work was designed and created by Frederick Hart, who has created other sculptures in Washington, DC. The faces of these men remind me of the soldiers in the Korean War Memorial, which I have high-lighted to the right side of the picture.

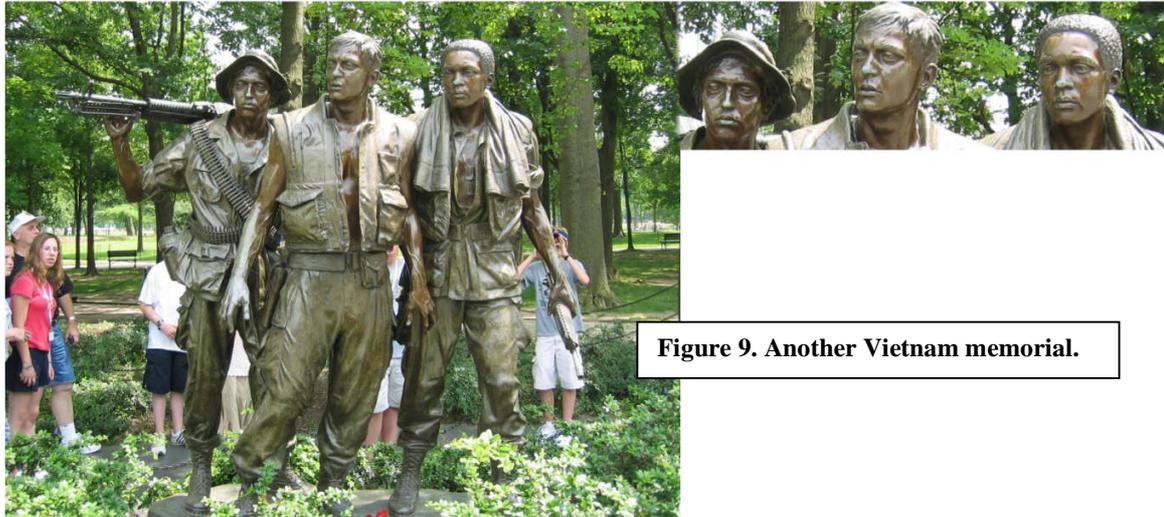


Figure 9. Another Vietnam memorial.

As I recall, the Hart work was placed in the Mall because of the controversy surrounding the Maya Lin work. Let’s see why.

The Maya Lin Vietnam Memorial

My first visit (1982) to the Vietnam War Memorial (designed by Maya Lin) was...Opps, it’s called the Vietnam *Veterans* Memorial (we cannot use the word “war” *or* the word “conflict”). I’ll start over. My first visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was a disappointment. My impression was that of an ugly V-shaped, black granite wall. It was *built* into the earth, as shown in Figure 10 (which depicts one side of the V).



Figure 10. A memorial hidden from view.

Not even lofty enough to warrant making an impression on Washington’s invisible skyline. Contained under the ground, as if it were ashamed to be there. The color *black* symbolizing what the color *black* usually symbolizes: death and misery (Except for my last name of course).

Through the years, I have changed my mind about this memorial. It is an elegant, quiet, understated honor to the Vietnam Veterans. I am always impressed by the impression the memorial makes on its visitors. Another rendition is shown in Figure 11.



Figure 11. Another view of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

I have not changed my mind about its effect on me. With each visit, I still walk away in a despondent frame of mind. Perhaps it is not the memorial itself. Perhaps it is my experience, my past association with Vietnam. Perhaps it is the sad way the Vietnam War unfolded and ended. I don't know, probably never will. I do know that an occasional visit is sufficient for me, and as my wife and I pick-up our stakes and head-out West to live, I doubt I will miss visiting this memorial.

I'm certain one reason I do not like visiting this place is because I have friends and ship mates whose names are on the wall. My U.S. Navy room mate (we shared a room aboard several Navy ships) has his name on the wall. If you are in Washington, look-up his name on the wall (Panel 11, Line 93). (Figure 12). His name is Lt. Ron Wolfe. After we parted company, he volunteered to be a river patrol officer and met his death on the Mekong River Delta.

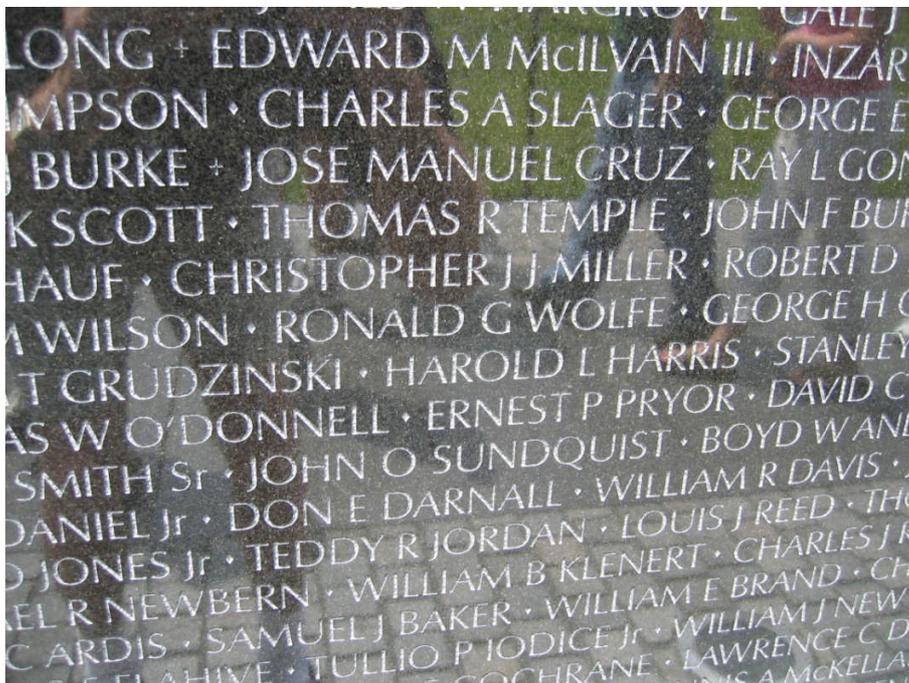


Figure 12. My shipmate's name, Ronald G. Wolfe.

An age-old remedy to being down is to be oblivious to the cause that might create the “down-ness” in the first place. Just ignore it. Your spouse depresses you? Ignore the spouse, or get another one. Job got you down? Don’t go to work, or get another job. Vietnam Memorial giving you the willies? Look at bugs, instead of the memorial.

The perfect cure: Bugs! My niece is one of the finest cures for funky moods I have come across lately. I have yet to see her not light-up anyone who is around her. Take a look at Figure 13. There she is, intent on checking-out a bug while we were visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (a couple years before I wrote this essay).



Figure 13. Cure for a funky mood: Look at live bugs instead of memorials for the dead.

But does ignoring a problem really work? Give this therapy a try: *When in distress, ignore the distress. When in doubt, ignore the doubt. When all else fails, ignore the failure... Whatever the mental consternation, it will eventually go away.* It’s a palliative that allows America to go to one war after another. Dr. Phil has his method. I have mine, and it works for me. The idea is especially useful for people who play golf or seek funding in Congressional districts for defense money.

Reflections from Some Vietnam Veterans

During this holiday, I overheard some conversations while I was at the Vietnam Memorial:

Veteran One, ”I had bad luck in ‘Nam. Got shot in the leg with only two more days to go on my tour.”

Veteran Two, “Thousands of names. Why aren’t I on this wall?”

But mostly silence. Quiet staring at a bleak, stark, black granite wall.

Several Veterans were visiting the Memorial in wheelchairs. God help us all. Confined to a wheelchair for over thirty years for a war---according to the current media --- that was not worth a hill of beans.

2014: Is that media correct? The Cold War---with the exception of recent Russia take-overs---is over. Was Vietnam a necessary part of it? We will never know. For this Viet Vet, one who went willingly and forcibly, it was part of the Cold War, and must be viewed in that context.

More T-Shirts

I recall the sayings on other T Shirts worn that day. I recorded several of these adages in my notebook: “They Served for America.” A map of the United States, with these words across it, “Home of the Free.” A yellow ribbon accompanied with, “We Support Our Troops.” A two-sided proclamation: On the front of the shirt, “America: Love it or Leave It.” On the back of the shirt, “Or Just Keep Quiet!” And another: On the front, “The Top Ten.” On the back, “The Ten Commandants.” The folks touring our war memorials cut across the color spectrum: Blue, red, and in-between.

Souvenirs for Sale

Several small huts were positioned near the Vietnam memorial. They sold patches and pins identifying a branch of service (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines), or an outfit within a branch of service (Paratroopers, SEALs, SeaBees, etc.). Others were generic, “WW II Veteran,” and “Vietnam Veteran.” I asked the man behind the counter of one of the huts, “Do you have a patch or pin for the Amphibs?”

- “The what?”
- “The Amphibs. Eh, the Amphibious branch of the Navy.”
- “Never heard of them.”
- “I see. Say, what branch of the service were you in?”
- “Army.”
- “That explains it. Anyway, the Amphibs were the guys who landed all those men on the Normandy Beaches on D-Day in World War II. We also landed a lot of Marines in Vietnam. But never any army troops.”
- “No wonder I don’t know about you. So, you guys operated those landing boats?”
- “Yep, that was us.”
- “Sorry, no patches here for Amphibs.”

I was tempted to buy a SEALs patch. But having been injured in my Frogman training, I decided displaying this emblem would be false advertising and chose to remain an incognito veteran for this visit to the Mall.

Next to the patch and pin hut sat a man with a stack of books on a small table. He was a Viet Vet and the author of these books. As I glanced briefly at him, he said, "Hello. Were you in Vietnam?"

"Yes," suspecting he would have no knowledge of my obscure, non-glamorous post in the Amphibs, I stated, "I was with Commander Amphibious Group One. We landed the Marines in Danang in '65 and transported frogmen and Special Forces to various island raids."

"Yes, and Chu Lai. Some of this is in my book."

I was impressed he knew what the "Amphibs" did in our "wars" and how important we were. So, I bought one of his books. As I stepped away from the table, and thumbed through his book, I overheard him say to another passing person, "Hello. Were you in Vietnam?"

More Wars, More Memorials

I hope you enjoyed the material about the war memorials on the Washington, DC Mall. Perhaps "enjoyed" is a poor choice of words. The subject matter was not exactly full of items to joke about. Here are few more thoughts about this matter.

Sometimes I wonder if in the future we will run out of room on the Mall for our war memorials? No question, we are making progress in filling-up the space. Of course, with the recent Supreme Court ruling on the government's right to seize private property for public use, I see no impediment to the National Park Service taking over land near the Mall for more memorials. Watergate is nearby. So is a Marriott Hotel.

What war memorials are in our future? Afghanistan: Probably in the planning stages. Iraq: Probably in the planning stages. Maybe Iran---if it continues its nuclear program. Maybe China--if it decides it needs as much oil as we do, and decides to build a military comparable to ours. Maybe Pakistan---a dubious ally as can be imagined. Maybe Saudi Arabia---after it runs out of oil. Maybe North Korea. No, we already have a Korean War Memorial. It can do double duty in case we have to take out North Korea's nucs.

Come to think of it, where is the Panama (We kicked Noriega out of his country) War Memorial? Where is the Mexican (Our Manifest Destiny armed forces kicked Mexico out of most of North America) War Memorial? Spain (Remember the Maine!)? The Philippines (Remember the Maine!...again because Spain owned the Philippines.)? And so on.

I wish I could say we humans don't need to go to war and later, build memorials to remind ourselves of all the deaths caused by these "conflicts" and "police actions." I can't because I believe some humans are evil. They are bent on doing great harm to others and must be curtailed.

I wish I could borrow from that T-shirt and say, "War sucks," and at the same time, also say "War is unnecessary." I wish I could, but given my opinion of human nature, I can't say the latter. Truth is, the sayings on the T-shirts high-lighted in this report, Red or Blue, are equally valid. Sure, war sucks. At the same time, America is free because it went to war with England.

Europe is free because we went to war with Germany. The Philippines, Singapore, and other Pacific nations are free because we went to war with Japan.

I would wager that you and I agree that we, as a nation, need to protect ourselves and take care of our self-interests. In an idealized world, everyone on Earth would be flower children and compete on, say, an economic plane. Maybe some other plane. Looks. Wit. Size of pectorals. Whatever. But that won't happen. It's Pollyanna to think so. We humans are set-up to protect and expand our turf. Using an all-American term: to kick ass.

A Symbol

But examining our behavior in a more benign light, I think it fair to counter with: Perhaps my suppositions are not so simple, and maybe just a bit too pure. In some situations, war comes about because of the conflict of ideas and philosophies, or the obligation to irradiate the pathological killers in our race. It does not always come down to turf or power. Recently, some wars have been waged to eliminate evil. Hitler had to be taken-out to prevent any more atrocities to the Jews and other "non-Aryan" people. The Japanese clique had to be eliminated to prevent any more Nanking-type atrocities.

I am not an expert on wars or on understanding rationales for wars. But I don't know how World War II could have been avoided. I don't know how Stalin could have been thwarted from taking over more territory without the Cold War to cage him in.

Of course, a person could counter my claims: "The Versailles Treaty created the background for the rise of Hitler. And Japan: all this nation was doing was emulating the European Imperialists....as well as trying to assure itself a supply of oil. Stalin and the Cold War? All he was doing was building a wall of security around his frequently assaulted country and the encroaching NATA, SEATO, and CENTO alliances. Who wouldn't have reacted to these blatant threats?"

I acknowledge these facts. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, and humans make mistakes. But given the facts that Hitler, Tojo, and Stalin did indeed exist, I know of no other way to have dealt with them other than World War II and the Cold War. As for the Cold War? Make no mistake Stalin was intent on expanding the USSR borders. (Recently released Russian archival material documents this intent.¹)

Don't Extend a Model Too Far

Another thought before closing. Germans are free because we went to war with Germany; the same holds for Japan. Yet these extraordinary success stories continue to plague our foreign policy. *We persist in believing we can convert every society on earth to a democracy because we did it with Japan and Germany.*

These countries were ready for this change. How about Chad? Afghanistan? Iraq? Our freedom mongers think so. I do not. Until we accept the fact that some societies function just fine without

¹ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Random House, 2003), 512. As Foreign Minister Molotov said, "...[taking territory] makes our struggle with capitalism easier."

America's interventions, that we should leave other *non-threatening* nations alone to practice their own religiously-based tribal ways, we will continue to build more war memorials.²

Anyway, no memorial better symbolizes the more noble aspects of America's wars than the Iwo Jima Memorial, located near the Mall, just across the Potomac River. See Figure 14.



Figure 14. The Iwo Jima Memorial.

The famous Iwo Jima photograph--- the model for this memorial---was staged. But it was staged from a real event. Those men raising the flag, and our other warriors, did not go to Iwo Jima to gain turf, wealth, or power. Some of their politicians sent them there for these reasons, but not these men. They went to defend America's republican and democratic concepts. No question, they also went for adventure and to sometimes to escape their mundane lives. But they also went because of their ideas about their country's ideals; and in some cases, because they felt threatened.

On this Memorial Day, as your Reporter tends to sink into a funk about that black granite wall, I--and perhaps you as well---need to reflect more about the fact that these war memorials are not about saluting power, politics, or world leaders. They are about common soldiers, sailors,

² Beyond the scope of this essay: Until the United States can figure out a way to fuel our fuel-driven society, we will be obligated to support the despotic oil-enriched nations. If you don't think so, then turn off your car's ignition switch. There! The solution is so easy.

Marines. America's GIs. That alone makes them worthy and fitting places to visit and to pay homage.

Still, after all is said and done. After all these "good" and "bad" wars are fought, wars should be undertaken as a very last resort. But again, given human nature, I don't think that's in the cards either. Preemptive wars have been with us humans since we existed. So, make way for additional acreage on the Mall for more war memorials. (We are already gearing up for China; just look at the gradual increase in anti-China rants from politicians and the media.)

Fortunately, the United States is a democracy and a republic. As such, we citizens can control our destiny, *if we have the will to do so*. We can decide about which wars we fight or do not fight, and which war memorials we build or do not build.

This is Your on the Street Reporter, signing off for now and wishing you and yours more Memorial Days to honor those whom we commemorate on this very special day in America.

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Addendum, May 2014.

A few years ago, my brother-in-law (Brad) called me. The reason he called was to thank me for my, as he said, "service to our country." It was a beautiful gesture. It took me aback. I responded with words to this effect.

I said thank you back to Brad. I also said that no one owned me thanks for doing what I considered to be what every citizen should do: serve his/her country; that it was not an act to be memorialized, but an obligation to be performed.

In turn, I took him aback. But being the gracious man he is, he responded that he was "thanking me anyway." What class he showed toward a slap to his graciousness. So, this is a public apology to my dear friend and bro. Thank you, Brad. Thank you for taking the time to thank me.