

Reader Response 3: Memory Set in Stone - Monuments and Memorials

Societies commemorate themselves with monuments and memorials to honor past bravery, usually regarding the death of those deemed worthy of commemoration. The presence and implementation of these monuments can be very politically motivated and often takes on new meaning beyond the recognition of a single person or war. The sources presented below detail multiple aspects of memorialization, or construction of memory. The papers concerning the Vietnam War Memorial and Lincoln memorial discuss the political turmoil surrounding these structures at length, suggesting the importance of politics in memory. The creation and destruction of memory is also brought into focus by the famous fortress of Masada in Israel and its modern use as a rallying call for zionism, as well as Pierre Nora's work *Between Memory and History*. Each interpretation and case study demonstrates that the politics of memory can be used to gain or demonstrate political power and ensure it for the foreseeable future. Memories are victim to political manipulation because once a memorial is completed, its message stands for all time and the political processes that shaped it are metaphorically and physically set in stone.

The ancient story of Masada has been manipulated and magnified to serve political purposes since World War Two by building a historical reference for the plight and bravery of the Jewish community. Recorded by a captured Jewish historian Josephus, the tale of Masada depicts captured Israeli rebels defending a heavily fortified hilltop from Roman legions.ⁱ Rather than surrendering after multiple years of siege, the entire garrison of the fort commits mass suicide as the ultimate rejection of the Roman's advance.ⁱⁱ While known at the time, the event was minor compared to other aspects of the Israeli rebellion like the capturing of Jerusalem.ⁱⁱⁱ However, a poem featuring the story of Masada gained popularity

during the inter-war years and sparked a resurgence of interest in the battle, causing "Masada will never fall again" to become a rallying cry of Zionism.^{iv} The resurgence of Masada was a politically valuable occurrence that reimagined a practically forgotten event as a present day tool. Beyond resurrecting the memory of Masada, the popular narrative of the event resurrects the dead by omitting the mention of mass suicide that was the focus of Josephus's ancient record, in favor of depictions of bravery and patriotism.^v The narrative of Masada has become institutionalized in film and practice, and serves as part of official army training in Israel. The conversion of memory to history is also of import to Pierre Nora, an outspoken voice against post-memory society. Although living memory of Masada died out long ago, Nora would consider Masada's rebirth as another example of how the "people of memory", the Jews, had history thrust upon them.^{vi}

The extended tentacles of politics also embrace our physical commemorations of the past, through bitter and entrenched debate regarding the details—architectural, interpretive, and logistical—of a monument or memorial. The final implementation of the Vietnam War Memorial (VWM) was heavily debated and scrutinized by multiple parties for its decidedly non-traditional appearance. Designed by Maya Lin, a young chinese-american woman at the time, the VWM is a large V composed of two modernist black marble ramps descending into the earth covered in the names of fallen soldiers.^{vii} It can be easily and viciously contrasted with the white marble obelisk of the Washington Memorial and the other white, greco-roman inspired pillars and monuments that surround the Washington Mall. Frequently opposed for its supposedly feminine and defeat-filled design, the VWM was a source of contention between modern artists, Vietnam Veterans, and members of both political parties.^{viii} By not erecting a white marble slab, the memorial implies defeat

and worse, disapproval for the war as a whole. The Lincoln Memorial was not created until decades after his assassination for similarly political reasons.^{ix} Lincoln represented the civil war and the country took a generation to reach the point where the political environment was favorable enough to build a large white marble memorial that honors the president as a liberator and hero. ^xDespised by many during the civil war, Lincoln's national image steadily improved and today he is universally celebrated as a hero. However, opinion of the Vietnam War has remained negative and with hints of regret and disappointment. Once the mark is made, the political symbol is set in stone and dominates all further discussion.

The conversion of memory (debatable) into history (fixed) is a political game to be played and won. Surprisingly, after all of the vigorous debate and manipulation, memorials and histories tend to fade away in a few generations. Robert Musil touches upon this subject quite comically by claiming that "Since we can do them no more harm in life, we thrust them with a memorial stone hung around their neck into the sea of oblivion."^{xi} His paper outlines how memorials are frequently ignored and blend into the background unlike the constant pestering of advertisements. The power of a memorial is directly a result of its unassuming nature. If the purpose or presence of a memorial were open to question, than they wouldn't represent such a firm account of our history. The memorial is supposed to be sub-conscious, undebatable, and aloof from political discussion because it is universally recognized as fact. The politics of memory are made permanent by the history of memorials, lending the memorializers considerable power.

ⁱ Yael Zerubavel, *Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors*, 74

ⁱⁱ Zerubavel, *Death of Memory and the Memory of Death*, 74

ⁱⁱⁱ Barry Schwartz et al. *The Recovery of Masada: A Study in Collective Memory*, 149

^{iv} Barry Schwartz et al. *The Recovery of Masada: A Study in Collective Memory*, 148

v masada film

vi Pierre Nora, *General Introduction: Between Memory and History*, 2

vii Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 46

viii Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 49

ix Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 49

x Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 51

xi Robert Musil, *Posthumus Papers of a Living Author*, 68

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