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Verbal Testimony

**Before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands**

**Hearing on S. 2419 and H.R. 4882, bills to ensure the proper remembrance
of Vietnam veterans and the Vietnam War by providing a deadline for
the designation of a visitor center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial**

May 16, 2006

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity, I am honored to testify on behalf of myself and the family of my best friend, Steve Mylant, a U.S. Marine who was killed in Vietnam in 1967; my fellow Vietnam Veterans; and my fellow citizens, who are in concert with the statements and concerns to be presented here but could not attend.

My testimony is directed to your deliberations regarding Senate bill Twenty Four Nineteen (S.2419) and House of Representatives bill Forty Eight Eighty Two (H.R. 4882), bills to ensure the proper remembrance of Vietnam veterans and the Vietnam War by providing a deadline for the designation of a visitor center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

I was shocked and angered, on learning from the National Trust for Historic Preservation of the course of action that the House of Representatives had taken with House bill Forty Eight Eighty Two (H.R. 4882) and the Senate is considering with bill Twenty Four Nineteen (S. 2419) . My alarm about these bills moved me to inform others and participate here.

Those who serve and have served have placed their lives on the line, with the belief that, as we bring freedom and self-determination to others, we are guaranteeing the same for our families and our fellow citizens. This bill, if enacted, will dishonor those who gave their all for their country and those who serve or served, by stripping the right and ability of ordinary citizens to participate in our government, especially from the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice as well as those who served and their families.

I can assure you from my personal experience that the laws which would be preempted by these bills – laws like the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act – are fundamental to the rights of citizens in our democracy, and are effective ways for citizens to participate in our government.

The House of Representatives seems to perceive citizen involvement as a nuisance that should be eliminated. They did not even give us an opportunity to present our insight on its impact.

It is critical to understand that, by shutting off these well-established public comment procedures, Congress would be silencing the voices of the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice, Vietnam veterans who served , and their families, and denying all the ability to have any say in the location and design of their visitor center.

It will also take away the opportunity to benefit from the still gravely needed healing process that the site selection and design process for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitors Center can bring.

I have had the privilege of participating as a veteran and as a citizen in volunteer organizations dedicated to honoring our heritage and honoring those who served. So I have a special appreciation for the importance of protecting our heritage, which these bills would undermine.

In my written testimony I cite four examples in which I have been personally involved, where the process of public involvement by citizens and veterans, including through the very laws that Congress is considering preempting here, are having a meaningful effect.

Because we as citizens and veterans so far were left out of these bill passage processes, I am one of the voices for those who want to make sure that the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice, those who still have both physical and emotional scars from the Vietnam War as well as their families, and the veterans who served, have an opportunity to be heard on how we are going to memorialize and interpret the story of their sacrifice, and alleviate their pain and suffering, and especially how we are going to help them and our nation heal.

Our soldiers serving in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the world expect and will find comfort knowing that on our watch the freedoms and rights of their families to participate in the government decision-making process are being protected, especially when many of them are sons and daughters of Vietnam Veterans.

My personal healing has come a long way because I have been able to participate in the administrative process that influences the decisions of our government. Gentlemen and ladies, through your actions you can help other veterans and the nation heal. Please do not disrupt the ability of others to heal by taking away their right to participate in the public process that will help to decide the location and design of our Visitor Center.

A little wait by us Vietnam Veterans and families through this process will give an opportunity for the end product to be a significant and memorable addition to our "Wall" and one that those honored on the "Wall" deserve. Taking the additional time to allow a public process would also give the Vietnam Veterans themselves the opportunity to participate in influencing the location and design of the new Visitor Center. The bill as proposed would completely shut us out of that discussion and all interested citizens, including the veterans themselves, deserve to be heard and have their right to participate defended and protected by this Congress.

I must commend the Chairman and this Senate committee for respecting their fellow citizens, especially the Vietnam War families and veterans by giving them this opportunity to express their position on this issue and bill. The wisdom you have demonstrated to hold this hearing and the cry from veterans and citizens can only lead you to conclude that this bill should not be passed.

Please let the process that is in place have a chance to work.

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