

Senator Craig Thomas, Chairman
Subcommittee on National Parks
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6150
Send via E-mail - c/o Sara E. Zecher, Staff Assistant
Tel. (202) 224-8276
Fax (202) 224-7970
E-mail: Sara_Zecher@energy.senate.gov

May 21, 2006

REPLIES BY RAY SAIKUS to Senator Thomas Questions dated May 18, 2006 - Reference Senate Subcommittee May 16, 2006 hearing on S.2419 and H.R. 4882

Q - (1) Are you concerned about the process that is being followed for the Vietnam Memorial Visitor Center or do you have specific concerns about the location or design?

A - (1) I am most concerned about the process, but I also have objections to the proposed design and location of the Visitor Center (see answer to #2 below). My fellow veterans and I are also concerned that Congress is focusing its time and energies away from more critical legislation on veterans' issues, and setting a precedent on interfering with established avenues for veterans and citizens to participate in determining the end result of such an important decision, just because someone creates an artificial deadline. When one individual's vision is bullied through without a review process, it loses its significance and will not incorporate the necessary features. A Congressional hearing is not the most effective or appropriate venue for trying to design a visitor center for a memorial, or to resolve fundamental differences about the vision for that important place. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund is not the only voice for this Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center. Passage of this bill would endorse them as the sole voice for Vietnam Veterans, and we object to that also. They have a right to participate as much as we do. But Jan Scruggs has a very limited vision of this visitor center as being for the youth, with no regard as to how the interpretation and design will totally disregard the feelings and pain of our fellow Vietnam Veterans and their families, and especially the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. The message that will go out for generations to come has to bring healing and peace to these veterans and their families. This is not a show-and-tell theater production that we are embarking on. I would encourage Senator Thomas and the other Senators from the Committee and Congress to reflect on how frustrated and angry they would feel if they were sitting in our place, and they were being excluded from having a voice in how to interpret for the public something that they had placed their lives on the line for. We are trying to help our Vietnam War families and veterans heal from that war and its ramifications. Instead, Congress just opened another wound by proposing to bypass the voices of the people affected by the Vietnam War. Congress has the power to help heal that wound by *not* passing these bills.

Q - (2) What would you like to see included in the Visitor Center for the Vietnam Memorial?

A - (2) The most critical facet is the location and design of the visitor center. One that has not experienced the Vietnam War and its ravages could not visualize every element that might be painful to many of us. The story to be told, and how it is told, will be the next most important issue, the transitions from all the suffering to the triumphs of war, families, and individuals, as well as the legacy that was left, needs special attention and widespread input.

The proposed design is an underground bunker, which evokes a variety of negative feelings. Aside from the obvious associations with combat, it also symbolizes Vietnam Veterans being swept under the rug, and hidden from public recognition. How much more healing it would be to let the light of day shine in on the public interpretation of the Vietnam War! Furthermore, an underground visitor center could be vulnerable to terrorist attack, and the fear

of such an attack would certainly be on the mind of many veterans in such a setting. We have a long way to go before finding the answer to what kind of design would be appropriate.

The proposed location is also a problem. As envisioned by Jan Scruggs, it would be a huge, ugly mound that would defoliate the landscape and degrade the setting of the Lincoln Memorial, and even the setting of our own Wall. It should be far enough away that the Wall can speak for itself. The Wall takes you through a range of emotions that one needs time and space to regain one's composure and serenity, the Visitor Center if done properly will also take one through a similar roller coaster of emotions and there needs to be time and space designed-in to allow for the recovery. More thought has to be invested into the design and site selection to understand the relationship between the Wall and the Visitor Center and where the visitors first visit might be directed to, if at all.

There are many Vietnam Veterans like myself who can and want to be contributors to make this phase of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial completion one that will leave a sense of belonging and give our fellow Vietnam Veterans another path to healing.

Q - (3) Do you think the Environmental Assessment for the Visitor Center should be completed during the site selection process or only for the construction of the facility?

A - (3) The Environmental Assessment for the Visitor Center should be done prior to site selection. It is unsound fiscally to invest in the design of a structure at a site if there are Environmental issues that could affect the Visitor Center's design, its costs and its ultimate function and purpose, as well as the surrounding memorials and other structures. The Environmental Assessment needs to include an evaluation of the effects of Radon and other contaminants, if any, on staff and artifacts, and a study of the emissions from the ventilation system. Also there should be a detailed security assessment performed for each potential site, since statistics from the number of visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial indicate that the final selection will be a highly visited site with great masses of people congregating, and could be a potential target for terrorist activity.

Q- (4) Do you consider the National Environmental Policy Act as a beneficial tool for evaluating projects and involving the public in the process?

A - (4) Both the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act are important laws requiring agencies to give pause and assess the impact of their proposed projects on other resources, and in particular to protect our surroundings as well as our rich historic heritage. These laws are not only beneficial tools for evaluating projects and involving the public in the process, they are actually essential in helping the public participate and embrace the preservation of our heritage and our way of life.

Respectfully



R. Ray Saikus
Vietnam Veteran 1968-69
173rd Airborne Brigade
P.O. Box 32700
Cleveland, Ohio 44132-0700
Tel. (216) 378-0535
E-mail: rsaikus@sbcglobal.net