

COMMENTS AND REQUESTS FROM:

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Ref. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Center Site Selection Environmental Assessment

Responsible Federal Agency:

National Park Service (NPS)

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REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE AS A CONSULTING PARTY UNDER SECTION 106

I, Rimantas (Ray) Saikus, a Vietnam Veteran, request to participate as a Consulting Party under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. I have standing based on my participation in Veterans issues and this project in US Senate testimony as described under Personal Background.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I am a Vietnam Veteran (1968-69 with the 173rd Airborne Brigade) who has been active in Veteran related activities since 1987. I am the Vice-President of the Memorial Day Association of Greater Cleveland (www.mdaogc.org) with the mission of documenting and decorating the gravesites of over 120,000 deceased veterans buried in over 150 cemeteries throughout Cuyahoga County (www.jvcooc.org) and organizing the county wide Memorial Day ceremony. I am also the Secretary-Treasurer of the Joint Veterans Commission of Cuyahoga County charged with the mission of conducting the Flag Day and U.S. Army Birthday commemoration event and the Veterans Day Ceremony as well as coordinating various veterans activities. I am a Lifetime Member of the Vietnam Veterans of America (Executive Board Member of Greater Cleveland Chapter 15). I am a Lifetime Member of the 82nd Airborne Division Association, John Towle Cleveland Chapter. I am an Executive Board member of the Cleveland Cultural Garden Federation (CCGF) and a delegate from the JVCOCC to the CCGF representing the interests of WWI Veterans Liberty Row Memorials (over 800 trees planted with medallions at their base to honor WWI soldiers killed in action). I am also the President of a civic organization, Citizens Vision (www.citizensvision.org). I have testified on May 16, 2006 before the US Senate Sub-Committee on National Parks in opposition to the Vietnam Veterans Visitor Center (VVMVC) legislation that would have excluded the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice, the Vietnam Veterans and their families, as well as the public, from participating in the site selection and design. I was a plaintiff (Committee to Save Cleveland's Huletts et al vs. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) in a successful lawsuit to enforce the National Historic Preservation Act. I have a Mechanical Engineering Degree as well as a MBA degree.

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INTRODUCTION TO POSITION ON ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

I was disturbed that the National Park Service did not notify me of the availability of this Environmental Assessment and the impending deadline, especially since I testified on this issue before the US Senate Sub-Committee on National Parks. I am grateful to Elizabeth Merritt of the National Trust for Historic Preservation for alerting me as to its existence, providing me a copy, and advising me of the deadline for comments.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center (VVMVC hereinafter) as proposed is objectionable to those who I shared the information with and to myself because the legislation is directing the building of this site underground "a Bunker", insensitive to Vietnam Veterans feelings that something relevant to honoring the sacrifice of their comrades and interpreting their own service as well as the sacrifice of their families, is again being placed out of sight, hidden as if in shame. Our memorial, "The Wall", was buried into the soil while the Korean and WWII memorials were allowed to stand in the line of sight on our National Mall and towering over the visitor. Those from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund have not been given exclusive rights to represent us Vietnam Veterans in the VVMVC site selection and design, they are welcome to participate without the exclusion of other Vietnam Veterans and the public. Those who gave their lives, to bring freedom to the peoples of foreign lands and to defend our democracy, and their families as well as those who served and their families will be dishonored if we deprive our fellow veterans and citizens the rights to participate in our nation's deliberations.

From the study - "The National Park Service (NPS), on behalf of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (the Fund), proposes to secure a site for the establishment of a Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center (the Center)." The name as used throughout this study and legislation was not thoroughly thought out since its acronym VVMVC has an objectionable ending to most of us Vietnam Veterans in that incorporates our enemy's acronym VC (Viet Cong) into something that is to memorialize our comrades in arms and interpret our service to our country. If this project would have been disseminated throughout the Vietnam Veteran community across the country, this would have been identified and the legislation would have been quite different as to name of the project and definitely about being underground.

Going forth with this project without consideration as to what will follow with the need for interpretive centers for the WWII, Korea and other veterans' related memorials is irresponsible and does not investigate the opportunity for completing the healing process for the wounds that the treatment of Vietnam veterans by the veterans of WWI and especially WWII and the public had inflicted on the Vietnam Veterans and their families. The motto of the Vietnam Veterans of America, "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another" was born for a reason and being a Vietnam Veteran I subscribe to that conviction. Not only we, Vietnam Veterans, have pledged to support our fellow veterans for wars and conflicts since our war but we have also taken the leadership to guarantee that veterans from all eras, past and future, are not forgotten, especially those who cannot come to their own defense. Korean Veterans have readily identified with our agonies and have supported us.

The ultimate sacrifice and the service to our country by countless of generations has to be valued the same, for doing otherwise we shame our country and we do a disservice to those who placed their lives in harms way and to their families. There is no one great generation, but there are those who are the greatest citizens in each generation, those being the ones who gave their lives for our country and their families as well as those who served and their families.

In Cleveland, Ohio, I was one of the founders of an organization, lead by Vietnam Veterans that went ahead and unified the honoring of those killed during our various wars by

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rededicating a Memorial, Marshall Fredericks "Fountain of Eternal Life", that was originally dedicated to those killed during the WWII and Korean Wars to one honoring those killed since the Spanish American War to the current Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. This symbol of unity and equal respect for all who made the ultimate sacrifice for us and our country, gave the Greater Cleveland community a very lasting peace and healing tool, especially to the families of those who gave their all and the Vietnam Veterans and their families. This rededicated Memorial with over 5500 names was complemented by a website www.clevelandvetsemorial.org.

FORMAT OF DOCUMENT AND PRESENTATION OF COMMENTS.

I have copied into this document sections of the Environmental Assessment and I will insert comments at each appropriate and corresponding area of concern throughout the document. Areas of concern within the study are highlighted in red.

1.2 Purpose and Need

The proposed action is the selection and approval of a site for the purpose of establishing a visitor center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As stated in the authorizing legislation, the purpose of the Center is "to better inform and educate the public about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam War." The Center would provide an opportunity to enhance the visitor experience to the Memorial and would be a resource that helps future generations connect our nation's past with their future. **It is intended to be inspirational, educational, and uplifting, a place for healing and reflection.**

*** COMMENT** - This project as it is conceived will create more wounds and will not comply with the intended purpose of being inspirational, ... uplifting, a place for healing and reflection.

Congress authorized the facility as an underground facility near the existing Memorial. It is intended that the facility would provide meaning and context, **present a personality to the names on the Wall**, and educate current and future generations about the Vietnam War, **including its national significance**, and the effect of the Wall itself on American culture.

*** COMMENT** - How can you relate a positive national significance when in all of the guidelines the VVMVC has to be out of sight from all significant areas of the Mall. The VVMVC has to be distant enough to motivate those who find the story of the soldier or soldiers that moves their heart and soul to walk that extra distance, to let "The Wall" embrace them and speak to their soul, and then for the visitor to reach for those names that by now their stories are imbedded in their minds. Or for the visitor who chooses to visit "The Wall" first, to allow him/her to clear their emotions before they engage them again when they experience the roller coaster of emotions that the story of the Vietnam War will take them through. And once engaged to give them the space and distance to build up their strength so they can handle the embrace of "The Wall" again.

1.4 Planning Process

1.4.1 Legislative Framework

- (1) construct a visitor center at or near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Federal land, in the District of Columbia, or its environs
- (2) **the visitor center shall be located underground.**
- (3) **the Fund shall consult with educators, veterans groups, and the NPS in developing the**

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proposed design of the visitor center.

*** COMMENT** - The only time I became aware of the visitor center planning is when it was being rushed through Congress in order to avoid the public process and exclude the families of those honored on "The Wall", the Vietnam Veterans who served and their families and the public in the selection of its location and design. Fortunately the National Trust for Historic Preservation alerted me of the activities and I was able to join the chorus of voices that protested the rest of us being excluded from this process.

(4) the visitor center shall be landscaped in a manner harmonious with the site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. According to the Act, the visitor center is to be considered a commemorative work and requires that site and design approval be consistent with the process established by the Commemorative Works Act.

*** COMMENT** - Burying the VVMVC will not bring out the welcoming feeling that we should experience when approaching and entering such a significant place for us and for our nation.

1.4.2 Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center Planning

The intent was to identify a site that would be closely related to the Memorial experience and would support the stated vision for the Center.

*** COMMENT** - The only relationship in experience that we can have that we will be going into hole in the ground. "The Wall" embraces you and your spirit can look to the heavens for relief of the pain and sorrow that one might be experiencing. The "Bunker" will take us into hell with no sight of relief, not delivering on its intended purpose - to be inspirational, educational, and uplifting, a place for healing and reflection. .

1.6 Cumulative Relationships of Nearby Projects

A cumulative impact is the impact on the environment which may result from the "incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such other actions. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time."

*** COMMENT - GRAVE ERROR** - The failure of considering foreseeable future actions in that as the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial "The Wall" moved others to erect the Korean and WWI memorials, the building of the VVMVC will move others to have a visitor center for each of the Korean and WWII monuments. It is critical to investigate all options regarding bringing together the presentation of our nation's war heroes throughout its history into one place. This will present the story of sacrifice and love for our country as well as the equal value that we as a nation and a people place on each an every life that is given in our defense and that of others throughout the world. No greater tribute can we give those who gave their all than to honor them together as we did in Cleveland, Ohio. That way as a nation we will heal.

Nearby Road Improvements

The Army Corps of Engineers has approved an unfunded flood protection project for the purpose of protecting the downtown area of Washington, DC. Modifications to Site G are part of the planned flood protection measures. NPS is currently responsible for constructing emergency

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closures at 23rd Street and Constitution Avenue, as guided by “Modifications to Washington, DC and Vicinity Flood Protection Project Environmental Assessment (1992).” According to this report, permanent measures to necessary prevent flooding would consist of two earth embankments separated by the eastbound ramp to Constitution Avenue for Theodore Roosevelt Bridge. The earthen berm constructed immediately west of 23rd Street and extending south (parallel) along 23rd Street from Constitution Avenue to Lincoln Memorial Circle would raise the existing grade to the west of 23rd Street.

* **COMMENT - GRAVE CONCERN** - Placing the remembrance of the sacrifice of our comrades and our service below the ground is painful enough but now we discover that our mementos and irreplaceable expressions of our experience will be subjected to potential flooding and it is inexcusable.

2.0 Site Selection and Alternatives Considered

2.1 Site Selection

Mandatory Criteria by the Fund

5. Allow appropriate visual identification of the entry for visitors to find the Center, within the constraints imposed by the other Criteria and in keeping with the limited use of signs and other graphics on the National Mall.

* **COMMENT -** This is a contradictory statement where it is hard to judge which criteria will take priority in interpreting. One says it cannot be seen and one says it should be seen.

12. Provide outdoor paved gathering space, near the Center’s entrance (preferably in tree shade) to allow for queuing and gathering for anticipated large groups of people and for possible security screening. Allow gathering space near the Center exit.

* **COMMENT - GRAVE CONCERN** - Again the planning is not in the best interest for security and welcoming visitors to have the best of experiences as dictated by the guiding principles. Entrance and exit is one, a grave security and safety breach.

13. Permit primary access and egress by accessible walks and ramps to accommodate intensive pedestrian traffic in each direction.

* **COMMENT -** Placing the VVMVC underground will diminish the presence that our VVMVC should have and then the multitude of people will further affect the ambience.

14. Allow accessibility for deliveries, service, emergency and security vehicles within the constraints imposed by the other Criteria.

Site E: Located within the Department of Interior South Building, Site E would be located north of Constitution Avenue, opposite the west end of Constitution Gardens Lake. Site E is visible from Constitution Avenue when approached from the east or west and from limited areas within the park. Selection of Site E for the Center would require conversion of the existing building space for the purpose of the Center, requiring extensive building renovations. The major limitations of Site E include the lack of visual connection between the entry/exit of the Center and the Flagpole Plaza and the need to

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cross a busy roadway, **which introduces a psychological break in the visitor experience.**

*** COMMENT -** As stated in previous comments the need for a psychological break should be evaluated further. To appreciate "The Wall" and let it speak for itself, the visitor needs to break from other emotions. The Vietnam Veterans and their families and the families of those who lost their loved ones in the war need to have room to recover before immersing themselves in either "The Wall" or the VVMVC (if it is done right).

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The environmental assessment of the alternative sites is guided by the potential to meet the following evaluation factors:

- The developable area within a given site should be determined based on existing constraints including limiting damage and preventing loss of existing trees; **minimizing topographic modifications, and avoiding the existing floodplain.**
- **The Center's entry/exit points should be connected to the primary starting point of the existing Memorial, the Flagpole Plaza, operationally, visually, and emotionally.**

*** COMMENT - GRAVE CONCERN** - What criteria established this decision, justify.

Site Development: Both sites being considered currently contain active recreational uses. **These ballfields would be retained as informal, multi-use recreational fields where possible.**

*** COMMENT - GRAVE CONCERN** - Will distract from the contemplative and serene setting that this special place and its visitors deserve.

Building Program: The building program is estimated to require approximately 25,000 square feet of exhibit and exhibit support space, maintenance and mechanical space, public entry and visitor services spaces, educational programming space, and administrative space. Exhibit areas would include display and interpretive features. The interior configuration and specific number of floors is unknown; the depth of the facility is **estimated to be approximately 30 feet below the existing grade.**

Building Entrance: The Center is to be an underground facility with the majority of the building located below the existing grade. **Primary access and egress for visitors and support functions would be provided by accessible walks and ramps through a single opening.**

*** COMMENT - GRAVE CONCERN** - Security and safety breach to have a single entrance and exit.

Modification of the topography would be necessary to eliminate the visibility of the entry from critical views. Sensitive re-grading of the site would provide a gentle earthen mound that would shield the entrance from surrounding views at a height (a maximum of 10 feet above grade) that would be low enough to allow views through the site to the Lincoln Memorial from Constitution

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Avenue. A design strategy that would allow the entry to disappear below the lawn in views from Lincoln Memorial Circle and Constitution Avenue, as well as from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

4.2 Cultural Resources Effects

5.1 Summary of Findings