

[Friot on Doubek, 'Creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: The Inside Story'](#)

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Robert W. Doubek. *Creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: The Inside Story*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 324 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7909-2.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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Robert W. Doubek says he aims to “set the record straight” when it comes to the genesis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He claims he has heard a number of “myths and speculations” about the origins of the memorial, but he does not clarify what they are or explain how they have muddled the history of its conception, construction, and dedication (p. 1). It might be the record Doubek intends to set straight is the one about who should get credit for the creation of what is now one of the most visited memorials in Washington, DC. According to his own writing (*To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, with Joel S. Swerdlow [1985], and *The War and the Wall: Service, Sacrifice and Honor* [2002]) as well as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) website, Vietnam veteran Jan C. Scruggs founded the VVMF and led the effort to finish the memorial in only two years. Doubek, however, contends he himself was “in charge of building the Memorial” and points to his massive personal collection of documents and records as evidence of his primary role in the project (pp. 1-2). The Library of Congress seems to agree with Doubek; the finding aid for the VVMF indicates that “as project director, Doubek, a cofounder of the fund, was also directly responsible for the design and construction of the memorial.”[1]

Creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is chock-full of details and anecdotes only an individual intimately familiar with the project could provide, and on that front Doubek does not disappoint. He relies on both his own memory and innumerable personal documents, as well as official archival collections, to describe the entire process from his first meeting with Scruggs in 1979 to the dedication of the memorial in 1982.

The first few chapters detail the humble beginnings of the project. Two men, Doubek and Scruggs, have a chance meeting in early spring of 1979 at a gathering of veterans who wanted to do something more for Vietnam Veterans Week than simply “publicly recognize with appropriate ceremonies and activities” their service or suffering.[2] Most of the veterans rejected Scruggs’s idea for a memorial, instead insisting vets needed more tangible recognition like benefits and improved medical care. Veterans continued to be divided over the need for, design of, and location of the memorial. Doubek did the legwork to incorporate the VVMF as a nonprofit organization while Scruggs lobbied for support from senators and representatives in Congress. Along the way they picked up other movers and shakers for the project, among them Jack Wheeler, a West Point grad currently working for the Securities Exchange Commission and Bill Jayne, a marine who endured the siege at Khe Sanh.

Not only did the Vietnam Veterans Memorial divide the nation but so too did it cause conflict among the individuals charged with its planning and construction. Despite their early partnership, Doubek and Scruggs butted heads throughout the course of the project. The persistent tension between Scruggs's cowboy methods and his own by-the-book approach to accomplishing their shared goal of seeing a memorial built to honor Vietnam veterans underscores most of Doubek's writing, and many of the details he incorporates to give the narrative texture ultimately strike the reader as critical and condescending. Describing his first encounter with Scruggs, Doubek points out his scruffy appearance. He had a "limp handshake" and spoke with "an accent [he'd] heard on country radio stations" (p. 9). Despite having earned bachelor's and master's degrees after serving in Vietnam, Doubek felt uncomfortable around Scruggs, and he "had a hard time comprehending [his cocky attitude] in view of his station in life" (p. 11). At a press conference introducing plans to build a memorial, Doubek thought Scruggs "looked like a refugee from a Tennessee Williams novel" in his three-piece cream, peach, and blue ensemble (p. 14).

Doubek and his comrades spent a good number of their early days soliciting funds. The VVMF website states Scruggs kickstarted the fund with 2,800 dollars of his own money, but if that is the case Doubek makes no mention of it. Instead he points out the embarrassment of starting the project with a meager 144.50 dollars in donations. Detractors pointed to the paltry sum as evidence of the futility of the project while supporters used it as a rallying cry to back it. Progress was slow, but through a combination of direct mailings and individual and corporate donations—including a ten-thousand-dollar donation from Ross Perot, as well as continued financial support from the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion—the VVMF raised over nine million dollars. In addition to procuring the necessary funds, Doubek's team had to wind its way through the congressional maze to secure passage of the legislation that would allow them to construct a memorial in Washington, DC. Not only did the legislation become law on July 1, 1980, but the location approved for the memorial also was Constitution Gardens in West Potomac Park, a pretty piece of real estate situated at the intersection of the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, a space with both high visibility and heavy with symbolic significance. Doubek and his associates were surprised and pleased that the legislation passed with relatively little fuss—at least compared to the storm that would follow the selection of the memorial design.

The controversy surrounding Maya Lin's provocative winning entry has been well documented, but Doubek devotes several chapters to the VVMF's selection process and the antagonism between those who thought the design "resemble[d] an erosion control project" and others who believed it would "capture [the] anguish of a decade of doubt" (pp. 137-38). A number of Doubek's sources come from Dr. Edward J. Gallagher's *The Vietnam Wall Controversy* website hosted by Lehigh University. There the interested reader can find an array of newspaper articles, editorials, photographs, documents, and interpretive summaries about the entire project. Doubek was unimpressed by Lin's submission and says he believed the jury made a mistake in selecting her entry. Admittedly not an artist by trade, Doubek thought the design focused too much on the dead and ignored the living. As he said, however, he was the "vendor, not the customer" and, at least publicly, "agreed with Scruggs" that it was "an appropriate way to honor the war dead, a buildable structure, and would be easy to raise money for" (p. 129). Privately, Doubek seems to have been disappointed by Lin. He describes their first meeting as "anticlimactic" and recalls he "anticipated a messiah emerging from the mists of competitionland" but was disappointed the Yale student who arrived wearing a "long dress ... and a porkpie hat ... didn't seem to know or care much about [them]" (p. 131).

Doubek does a masterful job recounting the nitty gritty of the approvals and construction process, giving readers new appreciation for the oftentimes mundane tasks required to realize monumental dreams. Beyond rebuffing opposition to the memorial, Doubek and his associates scrupulously checked and rechecked the lists containing the (then) 57,939 names that were to be inscribed on the wall. This time-consuming process involved comparing records from the National Archives and the Department of Defense, as well as those from the individual branches. Doubek also fielded phone calls from family members either advocating for names to be added to the memorial or refusing permission for their inclusion.

There is one mystery Doubek does not adequately resolve. When they applied for tax-exempt status as a nonprofit, the VVMF included in its application a promise to contribute 50 percent of up to one hundred thousand dollars in donations to Dr. Victor Westphall's memorial chapel in Eagle Nest, New Mexico. Helping Westphall was also on Scruggs's list of agenda items at his first meeting with Doubek. Indeed, when Congress passed legislation for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the resolution included language authorizing the secretary of the Interior to contribute funds to Westphall's memorial.[3] The actual law, P.L. 96-297, did not contain this provision, but Doubek does not address its absence. Once the VVMF got through the legislative process and started bringing in more substantial donations, its leadership seems to have abandoned its commitment to Westphall. Doubek sent "just over \$100" to Westphall in late summer 1980 but appears to have been guilted into it when Westphall sent him a letter reminding him about his commitment (p. 88). A November 1979 *Parade* magazine story featured Westphall and his chapel but also included contact information for the VVMF. Some individuals sent money to the VVMF specifically for the chapel, and it was these funds Doubek forwarded to Westphall. Westphall was clearly unhappy, because in January he sent a report "detailing his dissatisfaction" with the VVMF, and urged readers of his newsletter "to not support VVMF until [it] did 'justice' by the chapel." This was the last the VVMF heard from him and it made no additional effort to contact or support the memorial chapel. Doubek insisted Westphall "needed to raise his own funds" (p. 116). An audit of the VVMF in 1984 detailed its "broken promise" to Westphall but determined it was not legally obligated to contribute money toward the chapel.[4] One wonders why Doubek and his team were so willing to dismiss Westphall's request when helping him build the chapel had been a founding purpose of their organization. Doubek seems to treat Westphall as a bit of a pest, and despite his penchant for detail does not explain why the VVMF so quickly detached itself from Westphall's project. Without any input from Doubek, the reader assumes the VVMF was both preoccupied by the massive undertaking of building a memorial on the national stage and so protective of its fundraising efforts it had no desire to share any stage, big or small, with other commemorative efforts.

Doubek's closing chapters detail the dedication ceremonies for the memorial. The chapter titles are an ode to the VVMF's efforts—"Our Moment," "Our Parthenon"—but also Doubek's feeling of betrayal at the hands of his coworkers, with a chapter titled "Safe at Home but No Applause." The dedication eased much of the anxiety people felt about the design of the memorial. Doubek, though, was distressed at the appearance of the memorial grounds, which due to rain and the traipsing of thousands were all but destroyed. His "attitude at that point was one of pure resignation" and he "no longer gave a damn what anyone thought.... We had ... buil[t] a memorial. If anyone didn't like it, they could just go build their own" (p. 270).

Though Doubek finds satisfaction in the ultimate outcome of the memorial project and his role in

securing these achievements, something is missing. And this is the undertone of his entire book: Doubek had “expended [his] best efforts to the cause of the memorial, and it was painful to receive almost no credit and little support” (p. 109). He even attributes his lack of success in the romance department to his work on the memorial. A woman broke up with him because his “whole life was consumed with this project,” and he could not help but wonder if he was “terminally undesirable.” He consoles himself with the fact his former girlfriend’s employer, Mobil Oil, made a sizable donation to the memorial fund, but also in the kudos he receives from his close friends who assure him he is “doing something more important” (p. 153). He finally finds wedded bliss with Karen Bigelow who worked with the VVMF as the deputy campaign director. She, however, was eventually pushed out of the VVMF in the spring of 1983, and in the interest of both marital harmony and growing dissatisfaction with office personality politics that made him feel like an underappreciated outsider, Doubek too resigned from the organization.

These anecdotes of a decidedly personal nature certainly add texture to the story of how the memorial came to be. In the course of giving us an insider’s view of the divisive process of building a memorial almost as controversial as the war it intended to commemorate, Doubek perhaps shows us something even more valuable than the practical details of monument building. Much of the information in Doubek’s book is available elsewhere. Most, if not all, of the newspaper and magazine articles he references are available online, and a number of other monographs explain the debates over funding, location, and design. Even the government’s audit of the VVMF can be found with a quick internet search. The VVMF itself maintains a website that includes a history of the organization and the memorial.

Doubek’s real achievement here is how much of himself he reveals by recounting the minutiae of the project. The memorial is an object of some permanence, but it is the work of building it he does not want forgotten. When he said goodbye to his colleagues he quoted a passage from Samuel Eliot Morison’s *The Oxford History of the American People* (1965) and compared their work on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to the architects who designed the clipper ships of the 1850s. He thought of the memorial as their “Parthenon,” and they, its architects, had “for a few brief years ... flashed their splendor around the world” before they “disappeared with the finality of the wild pigeon” (p. 299). We do not often get the opportunity to learn about the men and women who, like Doubek, for a period of time pour their lives into giving texture and form to the suffering and loss of war. He shows us how deeply personal the work of memorial building is and gives us insight into the individual tempers that reignited and intensified the debate over the meaning of the Vietnam War by making decisions about how best to remember it.

Notes

[1]. Michael McElderry, *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Records Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1999), <http://rs5.loc.gov/service/mss/eadxmlmss/eadpdfmss/2003/ms003035.pdf>.

[2]. Jimmy Carter, “Proclamation 4647—Vietnam Veterans Week, 1979,” March 20, 1979, in *The American Presidency Project*, comp. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32068>.

[3]. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Joint Resolution to Authorize the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to Establish a Memorial*, 96 Cong., 1979, S.J. Res. 119.

[4]. Report by the Comptroller of the United States, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund's Financial Operations Were Properly Accounted for and Reported* (Washington, DC, May 23, 1984), 61-62, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/150/141667.pdf>.

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