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2309 North Glebe Road
Arlington, Virginia 22207
12 October, 1981

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE U.S. FINE ARTS COMMISSION:

Upon the recommendation of both Mr. Charles Atherton of the Fine Arts Commission, and Mr. Jack Wheeler of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation, I am forwarding this letter to you, with a request that it be made part of the official record in the matter of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial under consideration by your Commission.

I am a Marine Corps combat veteran of Vietnam, and have worked on veterans issues for several years, both as a counsel for the Veterans Affairs Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives and as a novelist. I have been privileged to serve on the National Sponsoring Committee for the VVMF, and it was my honor that my novel FIELDS OF FIRE was recommended reading for the judging panel in this competition. Because of these activities and their connection with the war, I am often contacted by veterans, both individually and through their organizations. Since the winner of design competition for the proposed Memorial was announced earlier this year, I have discussed the design with numerous Vietnam veterans from across the country, and their reaction has been almost unanimously negative.

This negative reaction has centered on a precise collection of disappointments, roughly summarized as follows:

1. Although the monument was not to be a "political statement," but rather a healing device, the choice of a black hole in the ground, a cave if you would, listing the names of those who died, is itself a very strong nihilistic statement regarding the war. Vietnam veterans themselves do not share this nihilism. In the most comprehensive survey to date, the Harris Survey of July, 1980 commissioned by the VA, 91 percent of Vietnam theater veterans stated that they were glad they had served their country. Other, equally graphic data is available.

2. In a monument dedicated to those who fought a war, nowhere do we see, in any context, the implements of war. One doesn't

need cannon and bayonets to be reminded that the memorial is dedicated to those who served in a war, but certainly, some part of the monument should relate to a patriotic offering of one's life on the altar of his culture. Some elements of this country may be embarrassed that this war in fact occurred, but this sort of artistic denial of that reality, when so many carry around its scars, is one of the purest forms of denigration imaginable. The nation that called on these men to bleed should not permit a monument that implies they should be ashamed of their scars.

3. The judging panel had no Vietnam veterans on it, and as such lacked the acute sensitivity needed to place the emotions of the issue in their proper context. The counterargument to this is that a Vietnam veteran would be guided by his singular view of the war, and that the judging panel would have deferred too heavily to such a biased perspective. The VVMF has stated on this point that, "because of the other jury members' empathy for such a person, they might be swayed too greatly by that person's opinion ... and the memorial might then become an expression of the experience of one man or a small group." This argument, while sincere, is interpreted by many to be condescending, the inference being that a Vietnam veteran with artistic skill and broadly based sensitivities would be unable to overcome his parochialism regarding his own experience. Unfortunately, our society is only now beginning to assimilate Vietnam in a context that breathes dignity into the acts of those who served, and the judging panel demonstrably could have used the insight of a veteran, since the veterans are ahead of the artists in this regard. This monument will last into the eons, and if it is not modified, it will reflect the incomplete assimilation process of the judges at one point in time, rather than making the definitive healing statement we all had so hoped for.

In a perfect world, my petition to this Commission would be that the monument be rejected and the competition be re-opened, with a Vietnam veteran as a member of the judging panel. However, I believe this would be injurious to the objective process by which the design was selected (however flawed in the judging panel's makeup), and would probably injure the efforts of the VVMF to build any monument whatsoever. Neither I nor the majority of the veterans I have spoken to desire to "destroy the monument in order to save it." The VVMF has done a salutary job, and it is my desire to continue to help them. However, for the sake of the "message" that this monument will communicate to generations of our countrymen regarding the principles for which so many

of us fought and bled, I believe the following modifications must be accomplished:

1. The American flag must be flown in a conspicuous place. The flag became an unhappy symbol of the war's unpopularity. Many who opposed the war made a mockery of the flag ~~it~~ by burning it publicly, wearing it as an article of clothing, flying it upside down, or replacing it with a Viet Cong flag on various mastheads. Many who fought the war will always relate to the flag with a great deal of emotion. I think, for instance, of the Marines of my company, who erected the American flag at the citadel in the battle for Hue City during TET 1968, at great cost. Although this occurred before I joined the company, it was always a source of pride. The flag should be shown in a lighted place, preferably at the juncture of the two walls, to symbolize the coming together of all factions, under the unity of our system of laws and values.

It should also be mentioned that the location of the flag at this point would serve as a safety factor, since the monument will not be visible from Constitution Avenue, and could be the cause of numerous accidents as people unknowingly walk or push wheelchairs over its top and fall into the "cave."

2. In the absence of the artifacts of war, the monument itself must contain a strong inscription denoting the values for which our countrymen fought and died. I have been shown the proposed inscription by the VVMF, and believe it will constitute a fitting tribute, to read as follows: "To honor and recognize the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam war, the names inscribed here preserve the memory of those who gave their lives and those who remain missing. As their names are ordered, in that order did the war claim them." And later, "These memorial grounds are dedicated to the courage, sacrifice and devotion to duty of all who served. Built through the private donations of Americans, November 11, 1982."

3. The memorial should either be raised above ground, or the stone should be changed from black to white. It is true that other monuments to wartime acts have been made of black granite. However, none of these employ the "cave" technique which, combined with black stone, create the mood of a black hole, the inference being that these Americans gave their lives performing acts that must be viewed with shame, during a dark period in our history. This "cave" symbology is the most frequent criticism I have heard from those who fought the

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war. It could be responded to by either allowing the names to be carved on white granite, or by allowing the memorial to peak, in effect turning it upside-down, if for some reason the black is considered essential to the design. In light of the serious drainage problems at the site, perhaps the latter recommendation would be the most logical.

4. The chronological listing of the names of those who gave their lives must be either modified or abandoned. This is a much-discussed item at the Commission itself, and I will not clutter it with redundant argument.

I trust this information is useful to the Commission. I cannot overstate its importance to those who served and to our entire posterity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James Webb".

James Webb