Remembering and Forgetting Wars: Memorialization of the Global War on Terrorism in the US

Kristina Seefeldt

ABSTRACT: This paper offers an insight into the efforts made by war memorial organizations to remember those who served in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and how the war is manifested in US cultural memory. To exemplify the ways the war is already being remembered by smaller communities and what upcoming plans to memorialize the GWOT in a nation-wide context look like, several memorials are analyzed according to the emotions they elicit and how these influence the memorials' narratives. The article is concluded by examining which elements of the memorials' war narratives are highlighted, and which are omitted.

KEYWORDS: War, Memorial, Cultural Memory, Military, Remembrance, Commemoration, Forgetting, Soldiers, Terrorism

> In many ways war and terrorism are very similar. Both involve acts of extreme violence, both are motivated by political, ideological or strategic ends, and both are inflicted by one group of individuals against another. The consequences of each are terrible for members of the population – whether intended or not.
>
> ("Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People: War and Terrorism")

Introduction: The Global War on Terrorism

On August 31, 2021, US President Joe Biden commented on the end of the War in Afghanistan, by remarking:

> As we close 20 years of war and strife and pain and sacrifice, it's time to look to the future, not the past — to a future that's safer, to a future that's more secure, to a future that honors those who served and all those who gave what President Lincoln called their "last full measure of devotion". I give you my word: With all of my heart, I believe this is the right decision, a wise decision, and the best decision for America. (Biden, "End of the War in Afghanistan")

He fails to address how those who served and lost their lives are to be commemorated and how one can cumulate two decades of a complex conflict into an object or an act of remembrance. In this article I aim to show the efforts that are being made to memorialize the Global War on Terrorism, or GWOT (Jackman; Skokos), including conflicts in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, or Yemen, to only name a few. The GWOT, which is the longest war in US American history, subsumes not only several fronts and stories of conflict,

but also covers over two decades of warfare. Extensive studies have been conducted on the GWOT and its commemorations are well documented. Scholars such as Michael C. Frank and Pavan Kumar Malreddy have analyzed novels regarding the national trauma of 9/11 and the GWOT, while others have looked at artistic representations of the war (Smith and Jones; Danchev). The broad variety of scholarly engagement with the war offers an in-depth look into the commemoration process regarding the GWOT (Jarvis; Mayo), including memorials built to honor victims of 9/11, or US military members (Heath-Kelly, Doss "De Oppresso Liber").

Despite the end of the War in Afghanistan, the GWOT is still considered ongoing due to continued counterterrorism operations, drone strikes, and GWOT service medals (Rosen; Novelly). As former President George W. Bush promised in his address to Congress and the American people in September of 2001, the "war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated" (Bush). The debate surrounding the end of the GWOT is of particular importance in the context of its memorialization process as it comes with distinct challenges of asymmetrical warfare such as being fought on a variety of fronts between the most well-funded military in the world and smaller terrorist splinter-groups.[1] Thus, the GWOT is "a war against a tactic, not a specific nation or political entity, which could last as long as any president deems the tactic a threat to national security" (Wilentz). The memorialization process is consequently incredibly complex as the undefined ending, the scattered battlefields and the power imbalance are difficult to encompass and project on a material object such as a war memorial.

In addition, the FBI's vague definition of terrorism as "[v]iolent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups" ("Terrorism"), as well as the popularization of the term by the US press (Reese and Lewis), raise the question of whether the GWOT can even be considered a war according to international law. For instance, "intense, protracted, organized inter-group fighting … where normal peacetime law and protections cannot operate" was distinctly absent during the invasion of Iraq and the hunt for Saddam Hussein (O'Connell 539). Despite the controversy surrounding the label GWOT, I will be using the acronym in order to analyze the war memorials as they are described by the memorial foundations and experienced by their visitors.

Initiated after the attacks on September 11, 2001, the official war against international terrorism has cost approximately 930,000 lives,[2] including around 390,000 civilian casualties (Crawford and Lutz).[3] Over three thousand civilians were "employees under contract with the U.S. government for public works or national defense" at the time of their death (*U.S. War*

[1] The war itself is predated by numerous counterterrorism operations, with the FBI's "counterterrorism budget [tripling] during the mid-1990s" (Kean et al. 77).

[2] The war deaths were caused by direct violence in major war zones, including Afghanistan, Cuba, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Philippines, Seychelles, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Yemen (Crawford and Lutz 2).

[3] The data on civilian deaths in most countries are largely "unknown and disputed" (Crawford and Lutz 5).

Costs). US military personnel make up under one percent of all casualties, with just over 7,000 service members, and at least 30,000 additional suicides among the three million who have served in post-9/11 war operations (Crawford and Lutz; Suitt). In addition, at least thirty-seven million people have been displaced (Vine et al.).[4] Monetarily, the war itself cost around eight trillion US dollars in total, including the budget for Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, Overseas Operations, and veteran care (Watson Institute).

The GWOT has been ongoing for over two decades, but the end of the War in Afghanistan in August of 2021 brought international media attention to it once again. The polarizing pictures of people's desperate attempts to flee the country, as well as of the Taliban occupying the Kabul airport, dominated the media and stressed the lack of preparedness by the US and allied forces. These pictures also showcased the human suffering the Armed Forces were leaving behind when they evacuated the country. The abrupt end of the War in Afghanistan and the chaotic scenes that followed reopened the discussion around the legitimacy of the conflict and the future of American international operations in general. The discourse is complicated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 as it overshadowed the media coverage the conflict in Afghanistan gathered, as well as the criticism the US government, namely President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump, faced a mere six months later.

In order to showcase how the memorialization process is manifested, and how the current debate on how to build an 'adequate' GWOT memorial looks like, I will use Erika Doss' theoretical framework on memorial analysis from her 2010 book *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, especially due to her focus on structures which address terrorism and security narratives. By discussing themes of fear, trauma, survival, healing, and heroic sacrifice, I will focus on how GWOT memorials such as the one located in front of National Infantry Museum in Georgia are constructed, what the arrangements may symbolize, how visitors can negotiate their time at the memorial, as well as tie them to the underlying academic discourse on remembering and forgetting. I will primarily use the concepts of settler colonialism, imperialism, and cultural memory and then build on that theoretical framework to address their influence on GWOT memorial narratives, which influence the current debates on the future GWOT memorial on National Mall. I want to stress how the powerful imagery attributed to memorials can spread patriotic narratives, and point towards discourses on personalization efforts, connections to 9/11, as well as the importance of location, and omittance of critical voices and non-American victims.

Remembrance Through Memorials

The concept of cultural memory is "tied to material objectivations," "purposefully established and ceremonialized," and "transports a fixed set of contents and meanings" (Erll, *Memory in*

[4] Thirty-seven million is a "very conservative estimate", as the actual number could be closer to fifty-nine million (Vine et al. 3).

Culture 28). It emphasizes the option of a materialization of memory through a cultural object and thus encompasses man-made structures like war memorials. Memory itself is a "key site through which the lived experience of time can be examined" (Keightley 185), which means that investigating objects of memory, which are interacted with in a specific place and time, such as war memorials, is beneficial when analyzing how the GWOT is commemorated by memorial foundations in public spaces, and which practices are involved. Positions in the discourses around the war take on a physical form and the foundations' narratives manifest and are more easily accessible, for instance, by noting who is honored by the memorial and who is omitted.

One of the core objectives of a memorial is to "express the attitudes and values of a community toward those persons and deeds that are memorialized" (Barber 65). Thus, war memorials are mainly used to unite people by honoring especially deserving heroes while strengthening group identities and values. The narratives surrounding the events of 9/11 and the GWOT are "overrun with references to heroism – to heroic firefighters, heroic soldiers, heroic national landscapes" and these heroes are then used to frame "the war on terror as a similarly 'good' war" (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 159, 167). They are painted as "heroes, sacrificial victims, icons of patriotic life, above all saturated with meaning" (Simpson 51). The focus is on the individuals and their sacrifices, which is used to "foreclose attention on the historical circumstances in which they occurred" (49).

Memorials are also built with "sentiments and utilitarian purposes" in mind, which makes them sacred spaces loaded with codes for social behavior and several layers of meanings (Mayo 62). This allows them to become special areas for commemorations, which makes expressing emotions tied to remembering warfare and its repercussions easier. It materializes in visitors leaving personal artifacts at the memorial grounds, which then become cultural artifacts and objects of collective memory (Sturken). These artifacts, for instance left at the wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, can range from teddy bears, to photos, or even personal letters, "symbolizing comfort and solace" (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 154).

Despite this positive connotation, "the role of memorialization as an attempted agency of legitimization of authority and social cohesion," is not to be disregarded (Osborne 432). Not only do memorials help convey moral guidelines and strengthen societal bonds, they also define and uphold an authority that decides what values are worth promoting and how the validity of their actions is conserved.[5] In terms of US war memorials, this authority is often the military itself or governing US bodies. As urban planning scholar James M. Mayo states, "[w]ar memorials can enhance memory, either through the historical beliefs in national political causes or through verified history" (74). Therefore, it is important to remark on how hierarchical structures can influence the formation of truth. Those who plan, fund, and build

[5] Doss attributes the reason behind the rapidly growing number of war memorials in the US to "the growing numbers of Americans [who] view public art as a particularly powerful vehicle of visibility and authority" (*Memorial Mania* 37).

a memorial ultimately decide what message the structure should convey and what visitors may take away from it (Jason).

The GWOT is "a war of memory and meaning (as all wars are), one utilized to explain in a particular cultural, geopolitical, and economic moment while repressing, or projecting onto others, previous incidents of US-led state violence" (Lubin 8–9). The narrative that is pushed can serve a multitude of purposes; it is often political in nature and used to overshadow the destructiveness of battle, the resulting trauma, or the act of war crimes. By disengaging the addressee from the realities of war, the overarching discussion on globalism, security politics, and nationalism, is simplified.

Memories are '"always constructed' and 'always contested'" which stresses the idea that the meanings and the value prescribed to certain memories and cultural objects are prone to change with time and therefore society should strive to always rethink their assumptions (Erll, "Travelling Memory" 15). Scholars such as Gary Baines argue that "historical memories are constantly refashioned to suit present purposes" and while memorials are solid structures with little room for quick changes, they can leave space for the transformation and adaptation of memory making (169; Foucault). Memory is constantly in motion, traveling between individuals or media products and thus has the potential to question the meanings and legitimacy of wars (Erll, "Travelling Memory" 11).

Thus, resorting to objects of cultural memory to make visitors "doubt that the sacrifices of war are valid, and also to question whether heroism must require such sacrifice" can be fruitful for a more holistic analysis of the function and impact of memorials, as they can help commemorate the GWOT in a more diverse, complex, and encompassing way (Lucker 140). Therefore, "it is crucial to understand what it is that people do with the temporal resources of modernity rather than assuming that they are at the mercy of them" (Keightley 195). While memorials as sacred spaces hold a certain authority over their visitors, the interactions with the memorial and the critical processes the visit can elicit, especially regarding the "country's ongoing negotiation of the war's meaning," are not to be dismissed (Ryan 8).

War memorials are therefore in the center of a discourse that entails differing narratives, audiences, and producers. By analyzing the impact of a memorial, it is thus crucial to view it as a complex structure with potential for providing its audience with a space of expressing emotions of honor, glory or even shame and grievance culminating in agreement or protest. Additionally, US-based war memorial narratives are heavily influenced by the US as a settler colonial nation with an international impact on countries portrayed as threats to democracy and the future of US imperialism.

The US as a Settler Colonial and Imperialist Nation

It is integral to highlight that a war memorial symbolizing US patriotism cannot be seen in an isolated setting of glorified war heroism but needs to address the history of the US as a settler colonial and imperialistic state. According to political scientist Melissa Lovell, "[s]ettler colonialism is an example of an institutionalised or normalised (and therefore mostly invisible) ideology of national identity" (3). The ideology of settler colonialism defines settler American identities as normal, and thus legitimizes the institution of the US to speak for all, actively erasing the Indigenous person whose land is occupied and stolen (Lovell). Settlers claim to "'remove' to establish a better polity," but by upheaving previously fixed systems and eliminating the hierarchies of power at hand, they have the means to decide new norms for the colonized, disregarding their wishes and traditions (Veracini 4). While settlers are seen as superior, the Indigenous person is depicted to be inferior and in need of replacement (Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native"). Thus, by idolizing the US settler mentality which is based on a systematic power imbalance that favors the US, a country oppressing and colonizing Indigenous land, the neocolonial, imperial violence enacted in the Middle East is legitimized as well.

David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe comment on the logics of the imperialism of the US as a settler colonial nation by highlighting the way it works in a neoliberal context:

> In this asymmetrical warfare of the entitled against the disenfranchised, the deadly if preposterous situation emerges that the most highly armed states in the world assure their populations that they (or their interests) are under a permanent state of siege, diffusely threatened by ragtag platoons of the dispossessed who, despite the considerable differences between them, uniformly qualify for the indiscriminate designation 'terrorists'. (2)

The GWOT, one of the most prominent wars of the neoliberal age, is one answer to this perceived threat. While terrorist attacks, including those on 9/11, are a real threat to the lives of American citizens, the scope and permanence of the attacks are exaggerated and used to portray the US military as a constant global protector, thereby validating its actions. In the case of Afghanistan, "the protection scenario [legitimized by the events on 9/11] and the 'civilizing' mission [of the US] were brought into an uneasy alliance to justify the destruction of a country's infrastructure" (Stabile and Kumar 771). By painting Afghan citizens and values as underdeveloped and barbaric, and simultaneously praising the values of freedom and democracy, the following warfare was justified. The war and occupation itself lasted twenty years and the demeaning rhetoric continues to prevail, actively perpetuating a neocolonial power structure.

However, by acknowledging the imperialism of the US and the crimes committed as a result, especially regarding the innocent victims of the GWOT, the way the nation is perceived would need to change. It "would require a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of America, one

necessary to think through both America's place in the world and the task of political reform for future generations" (Mamdani 603). This shift also affects the symbolism of war memorials and the experience their visitors have. As Lorenzo Veracini stresses in his theoretical overview on settler colonialism, the focus of research should not only be on the experiences of the groups who have been victims of settler colonialism, but also "on the settlers, on what they do, and how they think about what they do," in order to deconstruct the settlers' narratives (15). Thus, similar to turning the attention to the US as a settler colonial nation, highlighting its neocolonial and imperialist actions makes the way US war memorials are constructed and perceived a prominent feature of US cultural memory of previous wars.

While memorials on site, such as tourist attractions in Vietnam, can be designed specifically for visiting US veterans and their families (Henderson), they also have the potential to showcase the story of an occupied land. For instance, people in invaded countries such as Afghanistan call attention to the stories of their war victims through their memorials. The special significance of these memorials is that they include physical proximity to the battlefields and thus smaller memorials such as plaques or destroyed Soviet tanks "dot the countryside all over Afghanistan" which points to the immense impact the GWOT has had on the citizens and the landscape of the country (Ruttig). The invasion of US Armed Forces also resulted in the erasure of previously established memorials, such as the destruction of structures in Germany after World War II or the toppling of statues dedicated to Sadam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, "thereby erasing their symbolic authority from the social and political landscape" (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 9).

However, while these memorials all play into the overarching discourse on the GWOT, I will focus on US-based memorials in this article in order to illustrate how they commemorate the narratives surrounding the war. As Erika Doss claims in her book on *Memorial Mania*, the omnipresence of memorials in the US is due to:

> An obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts. Today's growing numbers of memorials represent heightened anxieties about who and what should be remembered in America. The passionate debates in which they are often embroiled represent efforts to harness those anxieties and control particular narratives about the nation and its publics (2).

Thus, the way the numerous GWOT memorials fit into the ongoing discourse on the US' settler colonial past, its imperialistic actions, and what emotions play into the anxieties connected to remembrance are of utmost importance. [6]

[6] Since 2004, more than one hundred GWOT memorials were dedicated nation-wide (*Site Selection Study* 79).

Memorials and Their Connection to Emotions

According to Doss, characteristics and narratives of terrorism memorials are often tied to emotions such as "grief, gratitude, fear, shame and anger" (*Memorial Mania* 2). The resulting (national) trauma after a terrorist attack then legitimizes the war that followed. Victims of the events on 9/11 are "staged as the victims of a war […] against America, which in turn has authorized a reactive war on what is called terror. Their deaths are paraded to legitimize more deaths elsewhere" (Simpson 47). Similar to memorials dedicated to the attacks on 9/11, GWOT memorials are part of a discourse which includes a variety of emotions, and political agendas.[7]

One function of US terrorism memorials is to address "widespread public fears about the state of the nation and the vulnerability of its citizens," and simultaneously offer security narratives "geared toward national unity and social stability" to counter those fears (*Memorial Mania* 119). This is equally true for war memorials dedicated to the GWOT. For instance, the Global War on Terrorism Memorial in Columbus, GA, which is located in front of The National Infantry Museum and Soldier Center near US Army post Fort Moore, showcases nine, 750-pound bronze figures representing an Infantry squad symbolically protecting two concrete columns holding a thirteen-foot steel beam "taken from the wreckage of the World Trade Center and donated to the museum by New York City firefighters" ("About the National Infantry Museum", Squillante). Through the line of sight of the statues, the focus is on the beam and thus the attack on the nation is emphasized. The memorial's statues create a dark backdrop for the beam, which is, due to its connection to 9/11, symbolically lifted to be above ground, held up by two columns representing the Twin Towers. It guides the statues and gives them a reason for their warfare which opens the discourse to an analysis of the GWOT and its connection to impactful political decisions. It appeals to a national identity supportive of the GWOT and American imperialism.

The memorial embodies the belief that the US military serves as the protector of the innocent victims of the attacks on 9/11 as well as any future victims of terrorism, which are depicted as both blameless and authentic (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 156). It reiterates narratives established by former President Bush, which perpetuate collective fear and trauma through the inclusion of the original beam from the wreckage, but it simultaneously offers a solution to those anxieties: Fighting in international operations of the GWOT. It paints the US as a victim, interwoven with the collective trauma of the September 11 attacks, needing its Armed Forces to fight for the security of their country, its citizens, and its values, never to be seen separate from their nationhood.

This effect can also be seen in other structures such as the War on Terror Memorial in the Veterans Park of Holly Springs, NC. It honors "all civilian and military fallen heroes who died

[7] 9/11 memorials are often directly "conceived as war memorials" (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 221).

while serving in the War on Terror and in the attack on 9/11," which further strengthens the link between the reasoning behind the cause of the war and the GWOT itself ("War on Terror Memorial"). The September 11 attacks are symbolized by a patio shaped like a pentagon, as well as a piece of steel from the ruins of the World Trade Center.

A second emotion that is potentially elicited by a war memorial visit is grief. Family members of the fallen and veterans use the memorial ground in order to grieve for the lives lost. As David Simpson states in his book *9/11: The Cultures of Commemoration*, "[r]ituals of memorialization exist to assimilate these intense and particular griefs into received vocabularies and higher, broader realms than the merely personal" (2). He goes on to say that "[i]n public memorials the personal identification may be nothing more than a name on the wall, but it is still intended and felt as personal" (2). As he points out, the individual grief that is reconstructed in a public memorial is often symbolized through lists of names which are an easy access point for visitors as they are "familiar, comforting, and recognizable signs of real people, literal evidence of humanity" (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 151). In the aforementioned GWOT memorial in Columbus, GA, about seven thousand names of fallen US military members were engraved on eight granite panels, with new names being added each year since its erection in October 2017 (Wright). By adding the names of those who lost their lives, the memorial committees and architects highlight and facilitate the individual, heroic narrative.[8]

The grief for every life lost and the sheer mass of names can be overwhelming, but it ties the personal emotions of visitors to the overarching narrative of the GWOT. The act of reading each individual name or searching for that of a loved one can prolong the visit and invites the reader to engage with the memorial.[9] The list of names can also bring order to an otherwise chaotic war and the resulting trauma (Doss, *Memorial Mania*). Grief can be an incredibly productive emotion, potentially pushing people to resist norms.

However, "[c]ontrolling and manipulating grief are ways of accessing its power" (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 116). By using the grief attached to the death of members of the Armed Forces in order to legitimize the invasion of countries like Afghanistan or Iraq, a narrative is perpetuated by influential politicians and avid supporters of the war, in which the US is not seen as a settler colonial or imperialist nation, but as a defender of American values and as a protector of their citizens. Naming is thus used to "secure understandings of national unity" while acknowledging the individual sacrifice (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 150). Personalization of the war heroes is a means to further collective remembrance and national pride (Knights). The memorial structures provide the visitors with a place to show gratitude towards those who fought in the war that is being commemorated as part of a "triumphant, and romanticized American past" (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 48). By highlighting the shared values and the nation

[8] The personalization of memorials is present in numerous structures commemorating the GWOT, including The Northwood Gratitude and Honor Memorial in Irvine, CA, or local GWOT memorials in Vineland, NJ, and Hampton, NH, honoring members of the Armed Forces from New Jersey or New Hampshire respectively.

[9] Reading all names etched into the wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial would take around 65 hours alone ("About the 2022 Reading of the Names").

these war heroes died for, the underlying imperial attitudes and power structures are also being legitimized. Thus, by focusing on individual tragedies, the overarching social and political consequences are overshadowed and accepted, or at least tolerated.

This is especially prominent in the remembrance of World War II, as former President Bill Clinton exemplifies in his speech on Memorial Day in 2000; he highlights the freedom brought to Europe by American heroes and urges US citizens to pay their social debt and "make their sacrifices matter" (Clinton). President Biden echoes the sentiment of gratitude in 2021 when he remarks that US war heroes "live forever in our hearts — forever proud, forever honorable, forever American" (Biden, "National Memorial Day"). This "patriotic memorializing" is still of utmost relevance as the US leadership continues to refer to the greatest generation and their success during WWII in order to justify their continued war efforts especially relating to the GWOT (Simpson 47).

Therefore, by fighting and eventually losing their lives on the battlefield, the heroes of the GWOT did not only represent themselves, but they also "fought for family, for country, and for humanity itself" (*"Clint Romesha"* 38:55-39:15). Their heroism is displayed not just to honor their courageous efforts, but to call attention to larger implications for the reputation of their comrades and the integrity of the US military. Simultaneously, non-American casualties are often disregarded completely by the designers and backers of the memorial. The humanity in question, that the US military fights for, is then focused solely on the protection of US citizens and values, which often results in acts completely oppositional to the idea of protecting global human rights.

A third, negatively connotated emotion addressed by Doss is shame. One of the most prominent examples of memorials inducing this feeling is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It is sometimes called a "black gash of shame," being perceived as a structure of defeat and collective guilt, which shows that planning and building a memorial is a delicate situation with many differing agendas colliding into a singular visual depiction (Sturken). Maya Lin, architect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, broke with memorial traditions which resulted in a space that is said to evoke emotions of guilt and sadness, rather than those of victory and honor.

Lin proves that differing interpretations of a war are possible to depict in memorials, however, it is crucial to mention that only the names of members of the US forces are part of the memorial, whereas activists who were against the war, veterans who died years after their service due to injuries they sustained during the war, as well as Vietnamese casualties are omitted from the narrative (Doss, *Memorial Mania*). The narratives surrounding non-American casualties are parallel to the ongoing remembrance of the GWOT. Both wars are highly criticized in terms of their legitimacy, and the unequal recognition of American and non-American losses.

Another strong emotion elicited by war memorials is anger. It can, similar to heroization processes, unite groups, especially if a scapegoat is found who the anger can be projected upon. The anger connected to the GWOT is fueled by the constant remembering of the events

of 9/11 and the narrative of revenge that is ingrained in it (Doss, *Memorial Mania* 327-8). As Doss stresses, "[i]n a post-9/11 America where outrage is condoned […] anger commands respect and unifies the nation" (328). A homogenous enemy figure is easy to villainize, especially if contrasted with the gratitude, grief, and fear of members of the Armed Forces, veterans and US civilians. In addition to the narratives of glorified, superior US military heroes the nation is forever indebted to, this use of anger leads to a continuation and upkeep of traditional views of the US military set in a system of settler colonialism and imperialism. Thus, political elites as well as the memorial foundations appeal to the tourists that visit war memorials, to stand behind the US military as the protector of the nation and its people, while not adequately informing them about the variety, funding, and nature of terrorist groups (Veer). By engaging target groups and offering broad, positive connotations such as the military members' honorable behavior, as well as negative ones perpetuating a racist and colonialist narrative framing countries such as Iran or Iraq as 'evil', US citizens are addressed as a homogenous, supportive group, and the narratives of wars like the GWOT, become simplified (Neal).[10]

The act of war commemoration can also quickly be interpreted as insensitive towards those who died in the war and its survivors, eliciting fear or anger, which highlights the fluidity of memory and its ability to be reinterpreted depending on the context (Aronstein, Gienow-Hecht 102). Particularly when one's views on the war clash with the expectations and purposes of the memorial and its advocates, "social conflicts can arise" and lead to productive discussions (Mayo 67, Butler). For instance, critics of the GWOT see the war as a way to export Islamophobic policies or remark that the war has created new threats while the US military was fighting in Afghanistan (Beydoun, Daalder and Lindsay). Instead of further destabilizing a country and perpetuating a purely military victory, they call for an end of the GWOT and thus focus their attention on the damage it has done rather than the victories the Armed Forces and the US government celebrate (Daalder and Lindsay).

These memories and emotions are fickle and constantly changing, while most war memorials, such as the ones addressed previously, are permanent structures, tied to the symbolism evoked by the location they are in. One way to bridge this discrepancy is to use the concept of traveling memory and build a memorial which travels nationwide such as the Veterans and Athletes United's GWOT Memorial Flag. The flag itself is twenty-eight-foot-wide and six-foot-tall, made out of over seven thousand dog tags. It also showcases veteran artist Alicia Dietz' wooden Battlefield Cross. Potential hosts can change the memorial's location and possibly alter its meaning as well as facilitate its reception and criticism. It can reach a more diverse audience and bring more attention to the way memorials are constructed and filled with symbolism. However, the majority of the planned locations in 2023 are patriotic events and spaces, such as memorial parks and events honoring the Armed Forces. Impactful, critical

[10] However, anger can also lead to the toppling of structures such as statues of racist figures after the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 (The New York Times).

engagement with the memorial will only be partially possible as the focus will remain on the remembrance of the dead, instead of their role in the complexity of the GWOT and its repercussions.

Despite being the organization behind a traveling memorial, Veterans and Athletes United is convinced of the importance of a memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., a famous tourist attraction and space of remembrance for past US wars. They have promised to donate any profits made to Gold Star Family foundations, as well as The Global War on Terrorism Memorial Foundation. This highlights the interconnectedness of GWOT memorials and the organization's belief in the importance of a memorial in Washington. The location on National Mall could potentially evoke numerous emotions and rituals connected to the sacred space honoring and partly glorifying fallen war heroes as well as provide a space to leave cultural artifacts.

Location Matters: The GWOT Memorial on National Mall

As of August 2023, the style of the GWOT Memorial on National Mall is yet to be determined, however, it has been announced that the memorial will be designed by Marlon Blackwell Architects and most probably be located between iconic national symbols like the future site of the Desert Shield and Desert Storm Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, and the US Institute of Peace ("National Capital Planning Commission"; "Marlon Blackwell").

The location of the GWOT memorial matters immensely as it cannot be seen separately from its surroundings, especially as its location acknowledges its contested nature, being situated between two very distinct memorials addressing the historical, liberating efforts of the US and the grief of loss of human life respectively. The symbolism a space holds plays into the emotions the memorial elicits as well as heavily influences how successful it is in fulfilling its mission. In addition, the location might restrict the GWOT memorial's design and size (*Site Selection Study*, Schaffer*)*. Being located near the future memorial commemorating the Gulf War, both memorials will subsequently reshape the current military-themed memorial structure on the National Mall, as they can add contemporary discourses around technological warfare, US imperialism, and memorial construction. Thus, the upcoming GWOT memorial will not only have to manage its own controversies of warfare but navigate the space it is going to be located in.

The memorial for the Gulf War will include a large spiral in the colors of sand dunes, an inscription wall, a bronze eagle and falcon, a battle scene, and a unity shield (*U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) Meeting*, 08:38-09:05). The memorial will not list names, despite the wishes from individual supporters, as, according to the Foundation, other than The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which "lists the names of the fallen to provide a place of mourning, healing and reconciliation," the legacy of the Gulf War "is entirely different" and should not be measured

in human casualties ("Will There be Names"). Instead, the focus lies on the historical impact of the war, the coalition of nations, and the environmental conditions of the battlefield.

Since 2015, there have been plans to build a GWOT memorial on the National Mall. Two years later, the Memorial Foundation received support from the Senate and Congress. Similar to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it began as a result of "pressure from the veterans themselves" (Neal 204), as well as military spouses and supportive Americans who wanted a "place to gather, reflect and heal" (Skokos). The GWOT memorial is to be dedicated to the "sacrifice of all individuals – both uniformed and non-uniformed – who have contributed to global counterterrorism efforts since September 11, 2001 ("About Us"). In 2021 it became official that the GWOT memorial would be exempt from a ten-year waiting period from the end of a war, which means the Foundation could start to plan and build the memorial immediately (Rodriguez). With the expedited process, the Foundation wants to avoid the mistakes of the past in which, "in every case except the Vietnam War memorial, […] war memorials were built too late for the veterans of those conflicts to fully appreciate" (Jackman). Due to the duration of the GWOT, the veterans and military families demand a commemoration while the war's meaning and repercussions are still being processed, which complicates the situation immensely. Critical voices, including some veterans of the GWOT, oppose the memorial as it "seems incredibly premature" and memorializes "tragic, foolish decisions" by US leaders (Boland).

Paradoxically, additional meanings of the war are yet to be determined but the Foundation plans for the prospective GWOT memorial to already incorporate them into the building process. For instance, the impact on countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan and the trauma survivors of the war have to grapple with is ongoing. The Foundation proposes to help commemorate the war by providing a multiplicity of interpretations, and to design it to be a "living memorial that changes over time," possibly through the use of technology (*Site Selection Study* 24*)*. Thus, the memorial may address both critics and defenders of the war, shape future narratives and have an impact on upcoming memorial designs.

Famous supporters of the memorial include several senators as well as former President George W. Bush, who serves as the Foundation's Honorary Chairman. Since Bush called for a War on Terror in 2001, his potential influence on the memorial's narrative needs to be highlighted. The CEO of the memorial foundation, Michael R. Rodriguez, is a veteran who was injured in combat and has experience in political advisory regarding veteran care as part of Bush's Military Service Initiative Advisory Council. However, they are not the only deciding voices as around thirty-five Veteran Service Organizations and countless other groups and individuals are also avid supporters. They continue to rally for the recognition of the GWOT and its American victims as equally honorable as those of past wars (Volk). However, not all Americans support the construction of a GWOT memorial on National Mall. Critics mention the still ongoing warfare, the unjustified nature of it, the lack of support from the American

public, as well as the overall disastrous political decisions made by the US political elite (Boland).

Nevertheless, the GWOT Memorial Foundation believes that the memorial should become part of the sacred, public space of the National Mall including its rituals and social codes (Mayo). For instance, they organized a march called *Ruck the Reserves* to celebrate the authorization to construct a GWOT memorial on the National Mall in December of 2021. The route went past "shrines to American heroes alongside which the Global War on Terrorism Memorial will one day take its place" ("Ruck the Reserve"). A series of marches have been hosted in the months since, becoming rituals tied to the space. The Foundation thus not only invites visitors to view the future memorial but encourages them to host their own march and engage with the GWOT and its cultural impact through a commemorating activity.

According to the Foundation's website, the memorial in Washington, D.C. is planned to be an "inclusive, reverent, and apolitical place of honor for all who have served and sacrificed in the ongoing GWOT, as well as the countless civilians, family members, and others who have supported them" ("About Us"). It will honor, heal, and empower by fostering honor for those who served, healing a multigenerational and multicultural conflict, and educating civilians and military communities "to build mutual understanding" according to Chairman of the Board and Army veteran Ted Skokos. In addition, he stresses the efforts of the memorial to unite Americans by fostering and sustaining their patriotism so they can continue to support the US Armed Forces and establish norms regarding American exceptionality in international defense and preventive warfare (Jarvis).[11]

Remembering Means Forgetting

If the GWOT Memorial Foundation appeals to the broad American public to support the US military and its function as the protector of the nation and its people, the controversies surrounding the GWOT, such as the drone killing of civilians,[12] will most likely not be addressed by the upcoming war memorial. The Foundation behind the GWOT memorial in Washington D.C. states that:

> The GWOT Memorial will be a lasting tribute to the courage and sacrifice of all who have served […] in the nation's longest ongoing conflict to protect our country, while inspiring all Americans to stand united behind those who continue to serve. (Sisk)

In order for the American public to stand united behind the US military and its leaders, memorial organizations often propagate US military heroism to try to overshadow non-

[11] One additional purpose of this memorial is to help educate Americans about the significance of the events on 9/11, the GWOT, and the US Armed Forces in general (Skokos, *Site Selection Study*)

[12] The Bureau of Investigate Journalism estimates a minimum of 14,040 confirmed US drone strikes between 2015 and 2020 with between 8,858 to 16,901 people killed in total in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. Civilian numbers range from 910 to 2,200 with 283 to 454 killed children (Serle and Purkiss).

American victims of the war, as well as the warfare itself. While this is not always the case necessarily, one of the most prevalent ways to overcome national trauma is to consciously change the narrative and rewrite history. The focus is entirely on the nation's image and its courageous, honorable citizens which means that the implications and results of an armed conflict, the manner it was fought, the reasons for its continuation, the role of American politicians and the millions of victims outside of the US are erased (Gienow-Hecht 102). Contrary to the Foundation's earlier remarks about the GWOT memorial on the National Mall being an "apolitical place," the focus on honoring members of the US Armed Forces tends to result in the omission, or at least marginalization, of other tragedies and downplays the criticism of the war itself ("About Us"). The GWOT has a political component which is essential to the discourse if the memorial is erected to remember and heal a multicultural conflict.[13]

According to memory studies scholar Astrid Erll, forgetting is an integral part of memory construction as "forgetting is the rule and remembering the exception" ("Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction" 9). Sociologist Elena Esposito agrees with Erll's assessment and states that memory never encompasses the entirety of an event but rather "selects the few aspects that are considered remarkable […] forgetting everything else" (185). In times of war, which facilitates the formation of heroic myths by creating situations which require incredible effort, courage, and willingness to sacrifice, the emphasis is often on the individuals who face its violent challenges and shine with extraordinary efforts (Röhrs 47, Knights 380). Thus, through only remembering selected parts of the war, the controversies surrounding it can be avoided and the war hero can easily be glorified (Neal 199). Heroes of the GWOT can then unify the nation and push it to be seen as a morally superior entity, justifying the war's continuation to this day.

GWOT memorials such as the one in Columbus, Georgia aid this effort by painting a one-sided picture and creating a narrative which thrives through omission. While this approach leaves room to criticize war, it often results in legitimizing future conflicts and repeating past justifications of warfare (Lucker 140; Lubin 8). The two decades since the beginning of the GWOT have brought to light many war crimes and other controversies which are not part of US citizens' immediate, everyday life even though they have been part of a nation at war since 2001.

A single memorial cannot subsume an "epoch-defining conflict," but the choice of memorial foundations, supporters of war memorials, as well as political elites to construct these structures in a very one-sided way, leaves little room for productive discourses on the horrors and legitimacies of war (Frank and Malreddy 92). It paints those who refuse to stand united behind military interventions to be less patriotic and understanding than those who see the memorial as the legacy of the fallen members of the Armed Forces.

[13] The GWOT Memorial Foundation's questionnaire states that the participants wish for "local allies in conflict zones, such as interpreters" to also be commemorated (*Site Selection Study* 74).

Conclusion

The memorial for the GWOT on the National Mall will cost around $100 million, raised privately through donations, and is likely be completed in 2027 ("Timeline of Events"). It is years down the line before visitors will be able to remember the heroes of its longest war next to all other fallen men and women on the premises. Similarly, only time will tell if the commemoration will be as impactful as future generations will need it to be in order to remember the GWOT as a flawed, complicated conflict. By catering to a plethora of emotions, visitors can benefit from engaging with concepts of identity and honor, as well as emotions of fear, gratitude, grief, shame and anger.

GWOT memorials such as the one in Columbus, GA, fail to encompass the war in its entirety and solely focus on the loss of American lives. While honoring the fallen of a country's military is an important part of memorializing armed conflicts, this narrative omits the story of millions of non-American victims who are cut out of the narrative partially or completely, sometimes even through villainization. By re-writing history in this way, future generations are taught to sympathize with a different reality and a simpler, untainted story of US intervention in other countries.

Analyzing GWOT memorials offers an insight into the effect of personalizing objects of remembrance and the close connection to memories of the attacks on 9/11. The constant reminder of the US as a victim needing to protect its citizens and defend its values leaves little room for additional voices, for instance those who are not considered to be patriotic enough as they criticize US military actions. Instead, the strength and dedication of the Armed Forces are highlighted, and their actions are collectively heroized.

Many GWOT memorials symbolize the sacrifices that were made to protect the democratic, free nation the US paints itself as and demand respect from future generations to understand and honor those principles. The call by supporters to accept these shrines of cultural memory as part of history distorts the narrative in favor of US imperialist nationhood. While the dead should not be forgotten, they should not be part of a glorified account of war either.

While no memorial will ever be able to highlight all complexities of a single conflict and address all controversies to the same degree at the same time, a memorial that is open to the differing narratives of remembrance leaves space for different (re-)interpretations and emotional reactions such as honor, pride, shame, or grief. War memorials do not only need to glorify fallen heroes but can be used to question the circumstances in which they died, the legitimacy of their actions and the reasoning for their deaths. Veterans and family members impacted by the wars, as well as visitors who are part of a generational, national trauma, also need a space to grieve and express negative and critical opinions about warfare. Similar to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, GWOT memorials can evoke a variety of reactions and meanings. War is not predictable, nor is it one-dimensional, and neither are the memories associated with it.

The memories carved into memorials and the stories told may then not only focus on heroic deeds but include the horrors of war so future generations can look to them to see where future conflicts might lead to. By critically examining the establishment of norms regarding warfare and engaging with remembrance on an emotional, as well as educational level, memorials cater to a variety of differing functions. Every new memorial will spark a debate on how to best balance patriotic memory with historical facts and every time it is integral to include both.

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