

# National Mall Coalition

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## Comments to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts on the WWII Memorial Circle of Remembrance FDR D-Day Plaque by the National Mall Coalition

**January 19, 2022**

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Dear Chair Tsien and Commissioners:

The National Mall Coalition has not commented publicly about the changes to the Circle of Remembrance component of the WWII Memorial in the past; we were not aware of the proposed redesign concept. Today we would like to submit a brief comment, and then raise some concerns about the growing movement, represented also by this project, to add new components to existing memorials on the Mall.

The Circle of Remembrance has always seemed to us a lonely, disjointed, and essentially meaningless element of the World War II Memorial. So we are interested to see improvements here, in response to Public Law 113-134 authorizing the addition to the memorial of a plaque or an inscription with FDR's words on D-Day, June 6, 1944. We believe the proposed changes – including upgrading materials, adding war-related plaques, and highlighting FDR's speech – will better connect this isolated memorial feature both physically and thematically to the main memorial plaza.

At the same time, however, we are concerned about the immediate as well as the cumulative effects of enhancing existing memorials. To be sure, no memorial can be expected to commemorate, to the satisfaction of all Americans (much less historians and critics), the meaning of important chapters in our country's history. But the impulse since the 1980s and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been to respond to perceived inadequacies by adding new components to the original memorial design.

At the Vietnam Memorial, first the Three Soldiers and flag were added to Maya Lin's design, then the nurses for the Vietnam Women's Memorial, then the agent orange plaque. The Korean Veterans Memorial intentionally chose a different approach from Vietnam, inscribing the granite wall with faces instead of names. But now those faces seem too impersonal to some, so that memorial is undergoing a major transformation, with walls and berms, to add the names of all who lost their lives in

that conflict. It is not far-fetched to anticipate objections to the forthcoming Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm Memorial once that memorial is revealed to the public and media – and to veterans of the subsequent, unsuccessful 2003 Iraq invasion. What form will any “corrections” take, and where on the Mall?

And as we continue to focus on existing memorials, so many of which are devoted to war, what about other important chapters of American history visitors will never encounter on the Mall? The National Park Service and National Capital Planning Commission will point out that in 2003 Congress declared the Mall a “substantially completed work of civic art.” For that reason NPS and NCPC tell new memorial sponsors to look for locations off the Mall. While Congress was legitimately trying to protect the Mall open space, the effect has been to stymie any hope of improving and enhancing the American story told on the Mall. Congress can make exceptions to its moratorium, as it did for the Desert Storm Memorial. But in such cases Congress is responding to political pressure, not to any thoughtful, larger vision of the Mall’s purpose as a symbol of our evolving democracy.

We urge this Commission to use its mandate, as advisor to Congress and to the President, to lead a conversation about the future of memorial-making on the Mall. Given current practices, what will be the cumulative effect — on the Mall's public open space and on the depth and breadth of the American history told on the Mall – if we continue to focus on revising and “improving” existing memorials instead of imagining how the history told on the Mall can and should continue to evolve? Can the Mall in truth be “complete” without any ability to respond to future generations’ actions, hopes, successes and failures as part of the American democratic experiment? How can the 1791 L’Enfant and 1901-2 McMillan Commission visions for the Mall help us imagine thoughtful, optimistic growth and evolution in the future? What role can Congress play in authorizing and overseeing an improved process for developing the Mall’s museum and memorial landscape?

We believe this Commission can do an enormous service to the American people, and to the Mall we all cherish as a symbol and stage for our democracy, by taking a leading role in initiating a thoughtful discussion about the future of the Mall. There is real urgency. New museums also seek a site on the traditional National Mall, and we have two new ones coming (Women’s History and American Latino). We need something akin to the McMillan Commission authorized by Congress to consider a comprehensive plan for the Mall and to define it to include new areas for siting museums and monuments.

**For the National Mall Coalition:**

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