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The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire: War, Remembrance, and an American Tragedy by Steven Trout
(review)

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immediately intuited) a path to citizenship for Black soldiers and their families. “In military service,” Boggs writes, “African American writers saw an opportunity for transforming the very grounds by which biopower operated” (p. 81). Arguing that the kin of Black soldiers also served the Union cause, African American writers relied on “the logics of substitution” to advance claims to citizenship (p. 106). Those claims, of course, would be contested after the war, just as questions about duty, loyalty, and patriotism persisted beyond the cessation of hostilities.

Routinized by the war (and especially the draft), the state’s scrutiny of male bodies also continued, as injured veterans appealed for and secured disability pensions (p. 116). Boggs, in her conclusion, remarks upon the “cultural work” performed by “injured veteran[s],” whose bodies “came to stand in for the state of the nation” (pp. 109, 116). Empty sleeves supplied a keen metaphor for both national and individual reconstruction. Yet many amputees appointed themselves custodians of the war’s “unfinished work” and fanned the conflict’s smoldering embers. Injuries, it should be pointed out, did not reliably yield to “narratives of national reconstruction.” And while African Americans did face some unique obstacles in suing for pension claims, White veterans also invited the skeptical gaze of pension bureaucrats and struggled to satisfy daunting evidentiary burdens (p. 109).

The author’s clever analysis and daring questions are evident in each chapter of this wide-ranging and thought-provoking book. It is not jargon-free, however, and as such will appeal to literary scholars more than historians.

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***The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire: War, Remembrance, and an American Tragedy.* By Steven Trout. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020. xiv, 239 pp.**

Steven Trout has written extensively on American memory of World War I, but in this monograph, he turns his attention to the building

of one of the first major American memorials to the Vietnam War in an isolated mountainous corner of New Mexico. The Vietnam Veterans Peace and Brotherhood Chapel, dedicated in May 1971, is the work of Victor Westphall, built as a way to mourn the death of his son David and to memorialize all who served in Vietnam. Trout's study is part collective family biography of the Westphall family and part case study of one of the first significant Vietnam War memorials built in the United States.

Among the most compelling parts of this book are the biographies of Victor and his wife, Jeanne Westphall, and their two sons, David and Walter. Born into families of modest backgrounds, Victor and Jeanne met in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and married on the eve of World War II. After serving as a naval officer in the Pacific, Victor came home unscathed, despite having witnessed plenty of death and destruction that did not spare civilians. After his discharge, Victor took advantage of the GI Bill to earn a doctorate in American civilization and emerged as a successful home builder in New Mexico. Victor and Jeanne had two children and prospered in the postwar economic boom.

Trout offers an empathetic account of their eldest son David's coming of age and his struggles as a young man to gain his bearings, especially his challenges on the athletic field and a failed marriage. After serving a tour as an enlisted man in the US Marine Corps from 1959 to 1963, David completed his college degree. But he soon volunteered in 1967 to serve again in the Marines and successfully gained acceptance into officer candidate school. Trout makes clear that David remained a true believer in the US mission in Vietnam until his death, in May 1968.

In many ways, Victor and Jeanne never fully recovered from the death of their son. Although they did not divorce, their marriage frayed, especially after Victor threw all his time and resources into building a modernistic memorial chapel near his home. Drawing on historian John Bodnar's distinction between official and vernacular memory, Trout places the memorial at Angel Fire clearly in the latter camp, deeming it "organic, spontaneous, and created by individuals with a direct connection to a past historical event and a deep emotional stake in its representation" (p. 10). This memorial would not

have existed without Victor's vision, financial support, and eventually his tireless efforts to entice the Disabled Veterans of American (DVA) to take ownership in 1982. Ownership of the Angel Fire memorial by the DVA and later the State of New Mexico led to important changes, including successive new names for the site. Until his death, in 2003, Victor protested many of the changes and was especially distressed by the alteration of the chapel's interior.

Victor's vision was complicated and at times conflicting. At times after his son's death, Victor criticized the American war effort and envisioned the memorial chapel as a means to promote peace. But he also (unsuccessfully) sought the participation of a Marine Corps honor guard in the dedication ceremonies in May 1971. He invited antiwar activist John Kerry to speak at the memorial dedication but appears to have graciously accepted a letter from President Richard M. Nixon shortly afterward and sent no reply rebuking his conduct of the war. On more than one occasion, Victor insisted that he bore no malice toward the enemy and even expressed a willingness to hang a picture, inside the chapel, of the North Vietnamese soldier who killed his son, but he backtracked from this statement when it threatened the support for his memorial in 1979. He sought bipartisan assistance from the New Mexico congressional delegation in an unsuccessful attempt to have the National Park Service take ownership of the memorial.

Trout's research is comprehensive, but there are some gaps. For instance, David's college education after he left the Marine Corps in 1963 would not have been covered by the GI Bill, since the Korean GI Bill had already expired and President Lyndon B. Johnson had not yet signed the Cold War GI Bill. Were David and his family Barry Goldwater Conservatives or Nixon Republicans, or did they embrace LBJ's Great Society? In 1972, did a disillusioned father favor the peace candidacy of George McGovern or vote for Nixon or remain detached from partisan politics? Despite Kerry's dedicatory remarks, Nixon nevertheless dispatched what appears to be an unsolicited letter to Westphall applauding his efforts to memorialize the war. Why? Is there a paper trail at the Nixon Library revealing which aide brought the memorial to the president's attention or who drafted the letter? For instance, did Nixon see an

article in his periodic news summaries compiled by his staff and scribble a note suggesting sending a letter to this grieving father? Furthermore, was Victor's memorial the first national memorial to the Vietnam War? Surprisingly, Trout does not discuss the Special Forces memorial statue at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, dedicated in 1969. That bellicose memorial certainly stands in sharp opposition to the ambiguous vernacular memory of the war forged by Westphall. The memorial at Angel Fire and Maya Lin's highly regarded black granite walls on the National Mall in Washington, DC, set the template for Vietnam War memorials that came after them.

Trout underscores the degree to which many war memorials in the United States rest on individual initiatives and often private monies. The memorial at Angel Fire would not have existed without the Westphall family, just as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, owes its existence to the initiative of Jan Scruggs as well as scores of corporate and individual donors. An engaging work, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire* is a welcome addition to the literature seeking to understand the complex legacy of one of America's longest wars.

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