

Testimony of Howard Segermark, Chairman Emeritus, Director, National Civic Art Society

Before the

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the

House Committee on Natural Resources

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Grijalva, members of the Subcommittee, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Howard Segermark, I'm not an architect or artist. I worked here on Capitol Hill as a staff members for both Republican and Democratic members of Congress and I've worked for a number of nonprofit organizations. I've read a bit about architecture and about what makes a city great, and I was drawn to classical architecture. I'm a founder and past Chairman of the National Civic Art Society, a nonprofit organization dedicated to education about architecture and art – with a view to supporting classical and traditional architecture and art – those traditions that the founding fathers believed embodied the principles of a democratic republic. I want to thank the Board and members of the NCAS for help and advice for this testimony, and in particular, NCAS present Chairman, Justin Shubow and our Secretary, Eric Wind.

Mr. Chairman, our monuments are of central importance to our national identity and historical memory.

Controversy is nothing new in the history of our presidential memorials. Indeed, it has embroiled virtually every single one. To mention the most recent example, it took three separate competitions to settle on a final design for the FDR Memorial. The first two officially selected designs were rejected—in the first instance because the Roosevelt family objected to it.

Many people might be wondering why this particular Memorial controversy is occurring only now, relatively late in the planning process. The reason is simple: the entire process has flown under the radar with as little public—and as little congressional—knowledge as possible. To quote Edward Feiner, the former chief architect of GSA who was involved in the Eisenhower Memorial design guidelines, “It’s amazing what you can do when no one’s looking.”

Well, we began to look, and the more we dug, the more we unearthed several disturbing findings. Given the limitations of time, I can mention today just a few, but I encourage the Subcommittee to follow-up on some of these questions.

First, designer selection process, including the so-called competition in 2008-2009. According to the minutes of the very first meeting of the Eisenhower Memorial Commission, all the way back in 2001, Chairman Rocco Siciliano specifically mentioned Mr. Gehry as the sort of

architect the Commission should have in mind. He mentioned Mr. Gehry again at the 2006 meeting, “Chairman Siciliano mentioned that he had a discussion several years ago with architect Frank Gehry, who indicated an interest in a possible design of the Eisenhower Memorial.”

Chairman Siciliano had had a previous professional relationship with Gehry on at least three prior occasions. Most prominently, when Chairman Siciliano was a leader of the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s Board of Directors, he served on the Building Committee that hired Mr. Gehry to design the symphony’s new concert hall.

It appears that in 2008, the Commission designated Daniel Feil, its executive architect, as its agent to oversee and direct the competition, which he chose to run by means of GSA’s Design Excellence Program. This was a very strange decision. That program was never intended to be used for the selection of designers for monuments, and memorials. Its fundamental purpose has been to select architects for federal office buildings, courthouses, and warehouses. It is important to understand that memorials are quite different from buildings—one does not need to be an architect to design a memorial. All it takes is an artist or amateur with a good idea, which an executive architect can later bring to fruition. Yet the Design Excellence Program is open only to architects—indeed, only architects with a substantial portfolio.

By contrast, the American way has been to choose designers for memorials not just according to actual design proposals but according to entries submitted blindly. But as just noted, the Design Excellence Program reverses this by making the designer’s identity and record of paramount importance. Furthermore, competitions for national memorials have tended to be open, not closed, competitions, unlike in the case here.

Thus, the use of the Design Excellence Program for the Eisenhower Memorial made it impossible to discover unknown and untested talent—such as Maya Lin for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Henry Shradly for the Grant Memorial. Consider that Eisenhower’s own rise from small-town Kansas to West Point was made possible only because the cadet-nominating process was open and democratic.

Furthermore, as the Commission ought to have known, the history of using the Design Excellence Program for memorials does not bode well for it. In the 1990s, the initial competition for the World War II Memorial was run according to the program. Due to the undemocratic nature of the competition, there was a public outcry against it. As a result, the organizers of the competition backed down and made the competition open. Such an outcry did not occur for the Eisenhower Memorial because the competition received so little publicity.

Amazingly, the Eisenhower competition solicited only 44 entries. This is hundreds fewer than the number of entries in open competitions for previous national memorials. Forty-four submissions was a small number even for run-of-the-mill federal office buildings around the same time period.

The Eisenhower competition appears to have been advertised only in one obscure place: FedBizOpps.com. And why did Mr. Gehry bother to enter, when he has said on numerous occasions that he does not like entering competitions because he does not like losing?

Adding to our concerns, when the Eisenhower Commission recently released the minutes from its meetings, it did not publish the minutes from meetings circa 2008 at which the competition was discussed. Stranger still, there does not appear to have been a quorum at those crucial meetings. What exactly is in those missing minutes? And why has the Commission never released the materials submitted by competition entrants?

The competition cost two million dollars and resulted in a colossal design that is now estimated to cost 119 million dollars. And that cost doesn't include the unusually extensive maintenance that the tangled steel screen will require for all of perpetuity—assuming the tapestry lasts beyond 100 years. Indeed, projected maintenance costs have not been released, if they have been calculated.

In the spring of 2011, the NCAS, together with the Institute for Classical Architecture & Classical America Mid-Atlantic Chapter, held an Eisenhower Memorial Counter-competition to suggest what a traditional, dignified alternative might look like. With a budget of just \$3,000, we received over 40 entries. We announced an astronomical prize of \$1,000 to the winner and \$500 for the runner-up. If I had time, I'd show that these proposals are not just superior in beauty and more comprehensible to the average citizen than Mr. Gehry's confused design. They are harmonious with the plan of the city and blend into the tradition of our presidential memorials. And their estimated cost is far more reasonable and in line with previous memorials. NCAS does not advocate any specific design.

The General Services Administration has massive responsibilities and it almost always protects the taxpayer in its purchase of goods, services and buildings. The Park Service has a history of maintaining our natural heritage. But on occasion, circumstances can conspire to produce a real mess. This seems to be one of those instances, but Congress can act to clean it up. Eisenhower deserves it.

Our remedy is simple: a new competition, one that is as open to an unknown designer from Abilene as a "starchitect" from Los Angeles. I stand ready to answer any questions I can and the National Civic Art Society stands ready to undertake research or respond to requests for expert counsel from artists and architects.

Thank you.