

Committee on Resources

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STATEMENT OF P. DANIEL SMITH, SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, CONCERNING H.R. 1442, TO AUTHORIZE THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF A VISITOR CENTER FOR THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

MAY 21, 2003

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 1442, which would authorize the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to construct a visitor center to provide information to the public on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

We are deeply appreciative of the sacrifices made by the men and women who bravely served our country in Vietnam. Our feelings of gratitude are heightened at this time of year, as we prepare for Memorial Day events in memory of those who lost their lives in that conflict. We share the interest of the congressional sponsors of H.R. 1442 in having the American public, particularly younger generations, better understand and appreciate the extraordinary burden borne by those who fought for our country during a most difficult, divisive, and painful time in our nation's history.

The veterans who served our nation in Vietnam are honored here in the Nation's Capital in what many view as one of the most emotionally moving memorials ever created. We are privileged to be the steward of this memorial. In that role, we are well aware of the deeply emotional experience visitors have when they see the Wall. We believe that it is vitally important that nothing detract from the powerful emotion that the memorial evokes, as it is that emotion that helps keep alive the public's appreciation of those who served in Vietnam. For this reason, as well as others, we give careful and cautious consideration of any proposal to add a new structure to the memorial.

The Department wants to ensure that a structure on or adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as envisioned by H.R. 1442, will not detract from visitors' experience at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the nearby Lincoln Memorial. We believe there may be other more suitable alternatives to the proposed visitor center that should be explored. We would like to work with the committee to identify alternative ways of fulfilling the goal of this legislation.

H.R. 1442 would authorize the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to construct a visitor center to provide information to the public on the memorial. The bill would authorize the center to be located either above ground or underground, on or adjacent to the memorial. It would require the Secretary of the Interior to offer to lease the center to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund for a 20-year term, renewable in 20-year increments. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund would be responsible for maintaining exhibits at the center and would share other maintenance responsibilities with the Department.

H.R. 1442 requires the visitor center to be located in a way that prevents interference with or encroachment on the memorial and protects open space and visual sightlines on the National Mall, and constructed and landscaped in a manner that is consistent with the Memorial and the National Mall. We appreciate that H.R. 1442 seeks to be sensitive to siting and design concerns that have been raised since similar legislation was first introduced three years ago.

As you know, several elements have already been added to the original black granite wall that were not part of the original design. They include the flagpole and the Three Servicemen statue, the Memorial to Women who Served in Vietnam that was constructed in 1993, and most recently, the In Memory Plaque, to those veterans who died after the war as a direct result of their military service in Vietnam, which was authorized in 2000. With each addition, the Department has been concerned about the risk of diminishing the original work. The proposed addition of a visitor center at the site poses a significant new challenge, since it would not be just another memorial element but, instead, a relatively large structure adjacent to the memorial.

A similar view is shared by the two commissions that, by law, review proposals for structures in the monumental core—the National Capital Planning Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts—as well as

the National Capital Memorial Commission, which advises the Secretary of the Interior and Congress on such proposals. Since the time legislation authorizing construction of a visitor or education center was first introduced, two design concepts have been publicized. One was a 1,200-square-foot above-ground facility that would be sited where the existing 168-square-foot information kiosk currently stands. All three commissions were opposed to that proposal, and the Department testified in opposition to it in testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on National Parks in July, 2001.

The other publicized design concept was an 8,000-square-foot underground facility, which would include a substantial above-ground entrance. In a February, 2002 letter to the President of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the Director of the National Park Service indicated support for the concept of an underground facility, so long as it was appropriately sized and sited, acceptable visually, and had a minimum of distracting qualities to the visitor experience. The Director committed the National Park Service to consult with the Fund, as well as the National Capital Memorial Commission, the Commission of Fine Arts, and the National Capital Planning Commission on the options available to enhance the interpretation of the memorial.

At the time that the letter was written, we believed that it might be possible to design an underground facility for the memorial that was, in fact, appropriately sized and sited for the memorial. Since that time, however, the National Park Service has consulted with representatives of the three commissions. They have expressed serious concerns that, because of the practical need for a large above-ground entrance, it would be virtually impossible to design an underground facility in close proximity to the memorial that is not intrusive on the visitor experience. In a public meeting in September, 2002, with the National Park Service representative abstaining, the National Capital Memorial Commission—which includes representation from the other two commissions—voted unanimously to oppose construction of an underground visitor center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

In addition, members of the three commissions are concerned about the precedent a facility of this type would set for other memorials. Structures similar to that proposed by H.R. 1442 have been disapproved or precluded at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt, World War II, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorials because they would detract from the visitor experience. These types of structures run counter to the Memorials and Museums Master Plan, which was endorsed by all three commissions after extensive public review. If a visitor center is allowed to be constructed at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it will make it much more difficult to deny proposals for such facilities at other similar memorials, despite both previous denials of such proposals and the guidelines opposing these structures contained in the approved Master Plan.

The Department is fully committed to educating the public about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the men and women who served our nation in Vietnam. For more than ten years, the Smithsonian has displayed an exhibit of the offerings left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and collected by National Park Service rangers. Other exhibits of offerings collected by the National Park Service have traveled to schools, universities, museums and veterans centers all over the world. In addition, the National Park Service has published a book and CD-ROM on the history of the memorial and runs a website designed to educate children about museum collections, including those associated with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The National Park Service has been involved in a number of news programs and television specials on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the history of our nation's involvement in Vietnam.

In coordination with the committee, we would like to investigate various alternatives for fulfilling the goal of this legislation. Two ideas we would like to explore are (1) enhancing the existing visitor kiosk and interpretation at the memorial, and (2) studying sites near the Mall where a visitor center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial could be located. We are open to other ideas, as well, that the committee, or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, or others may suggest.

On the first idea we mentioned, we think that it might be possible to modify the information kiosk at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to include computerized touchscreens that visitors could access to find information about the memorial, and individuals who served in Vietnam. The use of computer technology and touchscreens would enable a wide variety of periodically revolving information to be provided to visitors. This type of technology is already in use at the Korean War Veterans Memorial, and is planned for the World War II Memorial. Along with enhancing the visitor kiosk, the National Park Service would want to work with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to develop more extensive visitor outreach and interpretive programs that do not necessitate a new structure.

On the other idea, we would undertake a study to identify sites near the Mall that are feasible for a visitor

center specifically for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We would expect to work closely with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, as well as the committee, in conducting this study.

The goal of H.R. 1442 of educating the public about Vietnam is an admirable one, and one that the Department has fully supported and will continue to do so. We believe that the two possible courses we have suggested could lead to excellent opportunities to educate visitors about the men and women who served our nation in Vietnam, and would do so while preserving the sanctity of the memorial so that it appropriately honors them. And, as I mentioned, we are open to other ideas for pursuing the same goal. We look forward to working closely with the committee to fulfill the spirit of this legislation.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you or other members of the committee may have.