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## The Things We Remember: Interpreting the Virginia Memorial

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# The Things We Remember: Interpreting the Virginia Memorial

## **Abstract**

When I was in high school, I read *The Things They Carried* for my English class. It is a fiction book about the Vietnam War written by a Vietnam veteran. The author, Tim O'Brien, had the life experiences to write an autobiography based on true events, but he chose fiction as his vehicle. He explains this choice in one of the chapters in his book. O'Brien stated that, in an ironic way, fiction allowed him to share more truth than reality. His made-up stories allowed him to create the feelings and meanings of the war that his real experiences couldn't get across for people who had not lived them. This is an idea that has stuck with me ever since, and it has been on my mind a lot lately. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Dedication Day, Memory, Remembrance Day, Robert E. Lee, Virginia Memorial

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### The Things We Remember: Interpreting the Virginia Memorial

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

When I was in high school, I read *The Things They Carried* for my English class. It is a fiction book about the Vietnam War written by a Vietnam veteran. The author, Tim O'Brien, had the life experiences to write an autobiography based on true events, but he chose fiction as his vehicle. He explains this choice in one of the chapters in his book. O'Brien stated that, in an ironic way, fiction allowed him to share more truth than reality. His made-up stories allowed him to create the feelings and meanings of the war that his real experiences couldn't get across for people who had not lived them. This is an idea that has stuck with me ever since, and it has been on my mind a lot lately.

This year, I was asked to work on a special project for the Civil War Institute that involves creating a new wayside for the Gettysburg battlefield. Another student and I have partnered with Gettysburg NPS to write a wayside for the Virginia Memorial. This is a very daunting task, especially in today's political climate, which has made me all the more determined to do history and the monument justice. A lot of what I have been sifting through for the monument deals with Civil War memory, especially Gettysburg and Confederate memory. This is why I have kept going back to *The Things They Carried*. Like O'Brien's book, the Virginia Monument is a fictitious image of a war scene. It was not meant to depict an actual scene of war but to share important feelings. The big questions for me have been what those intended feelings were and how they have shaped our memory of Confederate involvement at Gettysburg.



*Virginia Memorial. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.*

The speeches from the monument's dedication answered many of my contextual questions. The memorial was revealed in June of 1917, two months after the United States entered World War I. The dedication speakers were quick to connect the monument's significance to war efforts. The country needed men to enlist and families to support the war effort from home. The Virginia Memorial became a tool for inspiring those sacrifices. Each speaker explained that by remembering the martial valor of Virginians and their dedication to the Confederacy, Americans would find an example of what would be required of them in World War I. "We treasure the heroic deeds and inspiring example of all the brave soldiers living and dead who gave to us and to the world a new standard of American manhood," proclaimed Henry Carter Stuart, Governor of Virginia.

This new standard of manhood was also used to reunite the country. Dedication speakers repeatedly stressed the greatness of American unity after such great sectional strife. Standing in the crowd on June 8, 1917 were Union and Confederate veterans. 54 years earlier, those same veterans had faced each other on opposite sides of the field for Pickett's Charge with the intention to kill. Something like that doesn't go away overnight. The design of the Virginia Memorial was an attempt to smooth over the still-lingering scars of war through a celebration of martial manhood. The Virginians at the base of the memorial represent the ideal soldiers. Although each man is from a different military branch, they are all strong and manly. Their faces and stances show a mixture of anxiety and determination. They are facing great odds, but they will go forward. Lee towers above the group, the picture of stoicism. He is calm and collected, even in the face of battle. At the time, he was also a reminder of Christian ideals. This was a man who believed God had a plan for him and allowed that faith to keep him steadfast. These were values that could be appreciated by men everywhere, regardless of their war loyalties. Those Union and Confederate veterans could stand beside each other in the crowd that June day and find common ground.

How these messages affect our memory of Gettysburg and the Confederacy is interesting. On the one hand, the romantic aspect of the Virginia Memorial obscures many realities. For example, the focus on the military side of war often excludes the Confederate cause. Like the Virginia Memorial, our conversations often jump right into the fight and skip past why the men were there fighting. The Confederacy was formed to protect the right to own slaves as property. The soldiers themselves had different reasons for fighting, but the ultimate Confederate goal was to successfully secede and protect slavery. We don't see that in the monument, and subsequently, most of us aren't having that conversation when we visit the battlefield. The Virginia Memorial also adds to the misconception that Gettysburg was the end of the Confederacy. When I talk to many of my non-history friends, they think that Gettysburg spelled the end for the Confederacy and that Appomattox was right around the corner. They are shocked when I tell them that the war continued for two more years after Gettysburg. Clearly, Gettysburg didn't end the Confederacy if they could keep going for two years; it was just one of their defeats. However, the Virginia Memorial's depiction of the soldiers as grimly determined to do their duty even though they knew they would lose makes Pickett's Charge the last stand of the Confederacy in popular memory.

On the other hand, the Virginia Memorial also reveals a lot about Americans at the time. Seeing the celebration of martial manhood reminds us of the importance of rigid gender roles at the time. We can see that men were expected to defend their cause and prove their worth on the battlefield. The absence of slavery representation tells us that Americans have always been uncomfortable with our past connection to the institution. It also shows us that unification was important above all else. Even though the Union won, Northerners allowed Southerners to place this shrine of Confederate ideals on the Gettysburg battlefield. Northerners allowed Lee to top this monument in a somewhat defiant location that allows him to stare down Union General Meade. Northerners even accepted speeches which hailed Virginians of the Confederacy as the ultimate examples of ideal soldiers and men. Virginians compromised by displaying their state flag on the monument instead of the Confederate flag. They also made several revisions to the inscription at the base in an attempt to find a less inflammatory message. Both sides were willing to make concessions for the goal of unity. That's the legacy that the Virginia Memorial gives us. We still have a lot of work to do as a nation, and we always will, but we treasure our unity and will always fight for that.

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