June 23, 2014

Re: S. 1044, “The World War II Memorial Prayer Act of 2013”

Dear Representative:

We are writing to urge you to vote no on S. 1044, “The World War II Memorial Prayer Act of 2013,” which calls for the installation of a plaque or inscription with a prayer at the World War II Memorial in the District of Columbia. Inserting this prayer onto the Memorial would run contrary to the Memorial’s goal of uniting Americans and defy the designers’ judgments, which were “painstakingly arrived upon after years of public deliberations and spirited public debate.”¹ The Memorial, as designed, is purposely short on words in order to evoke a powerful message of unity. And, in contrast to some of the rhetoric that has accompanied this debate, the monument already acknowledges that faith was important to many soldiers during the war.² There is no need to take extraordinary steps to reopen the design of the Memorial to add a prayer.

Inserting This Prayer Contradicts the Main Message of the Memorial—Unity

One of the main themes of the World War II Memorial is unity: “The memorial serves as a timeless reminder of the moral strength and the awesome power of a free people united in a common and just cause.”³ Adding a prayer to the completed Memorial, however, does not serve this theme. Instead, it introduces an element to the design on which many Americans disagree—religion. America’s military, like the nation itself, is extraordinarily religiously diverse. Our veterans, like our currently serving troops, come from many different religious traditions and some follow no spiritual path at all. Adding a prayer that represents some—but not all—veterans and members of the military defies the theme of unity and leaves many unrepresented.

The Bill Defies the Judgments of the Monument’s Designers

In adherence to the Commemorative Works Act (CWA), the original design process included “more than two dozen public reviews,” and “numerous informal design review sessions with members of the evaluation board and design competition jury.”⁴ The monument’s designers called for “Fewer Words—Less Inscriptions,” and “decided to reduce the number of inscription locations from 25 to 20 and to

³ Id. at 25.
⁴ Id. at 65.
emphasize evocative quotations from World War II participants—including Roosevelt, Truman, Marshall, Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Nimitz.”\textsuperscript{5} But S. 1044 calls for yet another inscription, clearly running counter to this goal, design, and aesthetic.

Indeed, the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission (NCMAC) “reviewed a proposal similar to the one before the committee today at its meeting on September 14, 2011, and determined that no additional elements should be inserted into this carefully designed memorial.”\textsuperscript{6} The American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), which Congress charged with designing and building the World War II Memorial, agreed with this decision.\textsuperscript{7}

S. 1044 appears to call for the design of the new inscription or plaque to go through the CWA process, but it actually “requires a different method of designing and locating the plaque or inscription than is provided in the CWA.”\textsuperscript{8} Nonetheless, calling for the plaque to go through the CWA process does not undo the fact that the Memorial’s design is being reopened and altered, or that the painstaking decisions made in the original CWA process are being overruled. The bill dictates that a specific inscription be added. Even if the exact location and the font of the inscription will be reviewed under the CWA, it does not cure the fact that the insertion of the plaque violates the original design process and, at a minimum, the spirit of the CWA.

\textbf{Such Meddling with the Design of a Memorial Is Nearly Unprecedented}

Redesigning critical aspects of a Memorial more than a decade after its dedication is nearly unprecedented. Congress did add an inscription at the Lincoln Memorial to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech” and added a plaque near the visitor center of the World War II Memorial to thank Former Senator Bob Dole for his “tireless support of” the Memorial. But these plaques are wholly different. Neither the King nor the Dole plaque changed the content and message of the memorial to which they were added: they did not alter, remove, or add language, images, or emblems relating to the honoring of President Lincoln or World War II veterans. Neither second-guessed the designers, historians, architects, or public input regarding the best way to honor Lincoln or veterans at the memorials. Instead, they left the memorials intact.

The plaque added at the Lincoln Memorial merely commemorated that spot as the site for an important historical event. In just a few words, the inscription commemorated Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech: the inscription includes the words “I HAVE A DREAM,” and acknowledges the speaker, the event, and the date. It does not add, detract, or change any aspects of the monument that reflect upon Lincoln.

The plaque honoring Bob Dole also does not change any reflections upon World War II. It was not even embedded into the World War II Memorial. Instead, it was placed at the Memorial’s visitor center, approximately 25 yards away from the World War II Memorial itself. Indeed, you must turn away from the Memorial to even see the plaque.

Inserting the prayer at the World War II Memorial, in contrast, would alter the content of the memorial and the message of the monument itself.

\textsuperscript{5} Id. at 76, 79.
\textsuperscript{6} Toothman testimony, supra, note 1.
\textsuperscript{7} Id.
\textsuperscript{8} Id.
It is true that “each visitor views the memorial through their own experience, which sometimes results in their questioning aspects of the design.”\(^9\) Since the Memorial’s dedication, soldiers have requested amendments to add the Battles of Cassino, Bougainville, and New Georgia; asked for changes to recognize the Canal Zone; and advocated for the inclusion of campaign ribbons.\(^10\) These requests were denied.\(^11\) Indeed, this questioning, no matter how heartfelt, should not reopen the design process. As explained in a letter written in 2006 by the American Battle Monuments Commission, “The government agencies for the design of the memorial . . . consider it complete, recognizing that the full story can never be captured in a memorial.”\(^12\)

For all of the above reasons and more, we urge you to oppose S. 1044.

Sincerely,

Maggie Garrett
Legislative Director

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\(^10\) Id. at 4, 25, 39, 51-52.

\(^11\) Id. at 3, 25, 38, 50, 71-73.

\(^12\) Id. at 3.