

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Digital Library Collections

This is a PDF of a folder from our textual collections.

Collection: First Lady, Office of the: Press Office
Records

Folder Title: RR/NR Visit to Vietnam Veterans
Memorial 11/11/1988

Box: OA 18747

To see more digitized collections visit:

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/digitized-textual-material>

To see all Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Inventories, visit:

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/white-house-inventories>

Contact a reference archivist at: **reagan.library@nara.gov**

Citation Guidelines: <https://reaganlibrary.gov/archives/research-support/citation-guide>

National Archives Catalogue: <https://catalog.archives.gov/>

Last Updated: 03/05/2025

Reagans Pay Emotional Visit To Vietnam Veterans Wall

Fate of the Missing Haunts Ceremony

By Michael York
Washington Post Staff Writer

Walking hand in hand, President Reagan and his wife Nancy spent several silent moments yesterday along the wall at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As Reagan stopped to leave a folded note to the more than 58,000 who died in the war, the first lady paused, reached out and touched the mirror-like black granite tablet of names.

Suddenly, the quiet was broken, as one of more than 10,000 people attending the Veterans Day ceremony shouted a protest of administration policy toward those still listed as missing in action.

"Mr. President, when will you bring my father home?" the woman shouted.

A few minutes earlier, Reagan had delivered a rousing, patriotic speech in which he declared that

America's cause in the war was "just."

That theme drew vigorous, sustained applause, but the president found himself the target of loud heckling when he mentioned negotiations with the Vietnamese over the return of remains of American soldiers.

As Reagan noted that the National Park Service now flies the white-on-black POW-MIA flag at the memorial on Veterans Day and Memorial Day, he was interrupted by protesters.

"Bring them home so we won't have to fly it anymore," a man in Army fatigues shouted. Reagan ignored the shouts and signs saying "Free American POWs" and "No more lies."

Many of those who did not join the shouting were nonetheless drawn to the ceremony by their concerns about those still missing.

See WALL, A14, Col. 4

■ Military families in the area share bittersweet memories. Page B1



As the president looks on, First Lady Nancy Reagan reaches out to touch wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. ASSOCIATED PRESS

Same picture/story
carried in NYTimes
Saturday, Nov. 12/88

WASHINGTON POST
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 1988

Same picture carried in
NYPost 11/12/88; also carried
NYDaily News 11/12/88

CONFIDENTIAL

PRESERVATION COPY



PHOTOS BY JAMES K.W. ATHERTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Leonard Randall of Greenbelt seems oblivious to the crowd around him as he gazes at the names on the memorial wall.

Vietnam War Was 'Just,' Reagan Says

WALL, From A1

Pete Clancey and Kevin McGonigle, Vietnam veterans, said they drove to Washington from New Jersey to register support for new efforts to determine the fate of the MIAs.

"I think there are a lot of unanswered questions," said McGonigle, a newly elected City Council member in Fanwood, N.J. "Vietnam refugees have said that they have seen Americans there. These questions need to be answered."

Both Jan Scruggs, a chief organizer of the Vietnam Memorial Fund, and John Wheeler, the fund's president, praised Reagan for supporting the wall's controversial design and for overruling former interior secretary James Watt, who had balked at issuing a construction permit.

Reagan, standing without an overcoat but with a stiff wind at his back, told the crowd that there were "deep divisions about the wisdom and rightness of the Vietnam War. Both sides spoke with honesty and fervor . . . and yet, after more than a decade of desperate boat people, after the killing fields of Cambodia . . . who can doubt that the cause for which our men fought was just?" he said.

The loudest applause came when Reagan said that the country had discovered a great truth in its Vietnam experience. "Perhaps at this late date we can all agree that we've learned one lesson: that young Americans must never again be sent to fight and die unless we are prepared to win," Reagan said in words reminiscent of his 1976 and 1980 campaigns.

Before he walked along the wall, the president also read the short note he would place along the wall. "Yes, young friends, for in our hearts you will always be young, full of the love that is youth, love of life, love of joy, love of country. You fought for your country with strength and courage . . . We love you for it, we honor you."

Sen.-elect Charles S. Robb (D-Va.), a veteran of the Vietnam War, told the crowd that the wall had become "a holy place," a place "of resolution and reconciliation."

Then Robb, who worked the crowd before and after the ceremony, sounded a political theme of his own, saying the country needs a period of healing and reconciliation now, after the national election, just as it did after the Vietnam War.

"This unity is needed across the board," Robb said. "Perhaps in no other area is the need so acute, however, as in the area of foreign policy. America's foreign policy must always draw a clear moral distinction between those who fight to enlarge the scope of freedom and those who conspire to shrink it."

Despite murmurings in the crowd about the possibility of a Robb-George Bush match-up in 1992, Robb repeated his intention of serving his full six-year Senate term. In an interview after the ceremony, Robb said, "I've indicated I have no hidden agenda, and I've indicated that [Gen. William Tecumseh] Sherman is still not very popular on our side of the Potomac."

H.F. (Sparky) Gierke, the American Legion's national commander, told the crowd that many Vietnam veterans continue to suffer effects

of post-traumatic stress disorder and exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange.

"The problems faced by these Vietnam veterans are real. They are not self-inflicted," said Gierke, who served in Vietnam and is now a justice on the North Dakota Supreme Court. "They are veterans who need help but are not getting it from a country they served."

At a news conference later, Gierke released a study by scientists at the American Cancer Society and the Columbia University School of Public Health that found soldiers exposed to Agent Orange were at an increased risk of developing benign tumors and skin diseases.

The study was based on questionnaires completed by 6,810 American Legion members, of whom about 40 percent served in South or East Asia. It also showed that veterans of intense combat were more likely to be divorced or separated and more likely to be smokers and heavy drinkers than were veterans who did not serve in Vietnam.

Before yesterday's ceremony, U.S. Park Police arrested a West Virginia man who they said had carried a concealed, automatic handgun through a metal detector.

A police spokesman said Larry Gene Hodges, of Montcalm in far southern West Virginia, was charged with carrying a concealed weapon, possessing an unregistered firearm and possessing unregistered ammunition. There were nine bullets in the gun when it was seized, the spokesman said, but police did not think Hodges intended to harm Reagan or anyone else at the ceremony.

Amkinund

PRESERVATION COPY



Sen.-elect Charles S. Robb (D-Va.) and Lynda Robb accompany President Reagan on his visit to the wall.



Veterans of the Vietnam War wait to visit the memorial wall in Constitution Gardens after services there yesterday.

(End)