

The Sorrowful History of the *Half-Life of War*

TOM PALAIMA

*Armstrong Centennial Professor of Classics
University of Texas at Austin*

In his deeply personal and moving director's statement, Kyle Henry asks three questions about the memorials strewn across the United States relating to our many wars and our many dead soldiers: Do these monuments accurately reflect the trauma of the experience of war itself? Do we create them to remember or to forget? And why do we then neglect even these sanitized memorials, forgetting they even exist within our midst?

The answers to Henry's questions are inside each and every one of us. He knows this, and the very title of his film documentary suggests answers. He uses images and sounds connected with our many American wars and with how our war monuments are situated in our everyday lives to get us to look at them and then to question our relationship to them. We owe answers to ourselves and to all those who died fighting our wars.

War memorials and war monuments have a long history in western culture because wars have an equally long history. The very Indo-European roots of the two words indicate that their original purpose was to get us to do what *Half-Life of War* urges us to do: to keep in mind (**smer-*, reduplicated as *me-mor-*) and to think about (**men-*, in so-called *o-grade *mon-*) all those wars and the fellow human beings who fought and died in them.

General Douglass MacArthur famously misattributed the comment that "only the dead have seen an end to war" to Plato. It was actually a thought that the philosopher George Santayana had at the end of World War I when he observed how naively eager British veterans were to put the war behind them. They desperately wanted to believe that an armistice and a solemnly enacted peace treaty meant a lasting end to the virtually indiscriminate mass slaughter of modern mechanized warfare. Yet the impulse identified by Santayana and MacArthur is a natural collective human response to the pain and suffering caused by war. To forget is a kind of opiate. And so we are left with Kyle Henry's questions.

Of course, monuments of war cannot and never have captured the trauma of war itself. But that trauma is nonetheless truly radioactive. Every single act of violence experienced in the sphere of war alters the lives of the soldiers involved forever and also affects the lives of everyone who later comes into contact with them.

Yehuda Amichai, an Israeli poet with a lifelong direct experience of war after war after war, gets this terrible point across in his powerful short poem "The Diameter of the Bomb." Death and wounding cause grief and sorrow that radiates outward, eventually "includ[ing] the entire world." If we think about it long enough, it even takes away belief in God and in human virtue. So we generally prefer not to think about it.

The ancient Greeks knew this, and so, in a period well before public education existed, they held regular communal ceremonies where oral songs were performed that hymned the realities of war, for soldiers in the field and veterans returned home, for families left behind or families threatened in besieged cities. Like folk and blues songs in traditions gathered up by modern ethnomusicologists, Greek epic and elegiac song poems laid out the hard realities, the irremediable pain, the clear randomness of deaths and wounds—Why *him* and not *him*? Why *my* husband (or son or brother or father) and not *theirs*?—like so many patients etherized upon tables for the whole community to examine and process.

War memorials serve a similar communalizing purpose. The earliest that we can point to are simple upright stone *stelai*, like the modern stone grave markers that stand in anonymous massed formation in Henry's stark, wintry, *pathos*-laden closing shot. These *stelai* from the 16th century BCE stand over the royal shaft graves at the site of Mycenae. On them are carved, before writing was used for such purposes, symbolic images of prowess in the use of the military weaponry that is buried with the aristocratic dead below.

In historical times, according to recent theory, the *tropaion*, a simple stone battlefield marker, was used to note the place where the victorious hoplite force 'turned' (see our word *trope* for a literary 'turn' of phrase) the defeated army. This provided, as it were, an officially fixed point for a common narrative about the brutal clash of infantry soldiers whose understanding of the battle in which they took part was limited to trying to push back, kill or maim the armed soldiers immediately in front of them.

Later, officially inscribed public stone monuments listed the names of the citizen soldiers who had died in specific campaigns in a given year. They were listed by the tribes with which their extended families or clan groups were affiliated, often beneath a header giving some brief information about the where and the when of their fighting. These are virtually identical to the granite or marble *stelai* with engraved or raised letters, sometimes colored in black or white or gilding, that are the focus of much of the last half of *Half-Life of War*.

The names are critically important. Think of the refrain in Woody Guthrie's song about the soldiers who died when the first US navy ship, the destroyer Reuben James, was sunk by a German submarine on 31 October 1941: "Tell me what were their names, tell me what were their names, /Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?" Notice Guthrie's focus on personal connections. Did you have a friend?

Public communal commemoration is clearly for the living, to give the senseless deaths of loved ones some kind of meaning. For the Greeks of the heyday of ancient Athens, we have no records of victory parades. Since wars were an annual given, a terrible fact of everyday life, they focused on paying tribute to the dead. In a culture wherein even a virtuous life did not bring rewards in an after-life, primary importance was given to perpetuating the names of fallen soldiers on public stone records and in the very names of sons and grandsons. So far as I know, however,

there is no indication that their public stone inscriptions suffered less communal disinterest over time than ours.

My conclusion may seem cynical, but it is derived from a long view of human history and human behavior surrounding the collective use of killing force that we call war. Human beings have short attention spans and nearly everything for each of us is personal, unless we try hard to see and feel and remember it otherwise.

Woody Guthrie knew this. His original intention was to sing out in a song the names of all the sailors who accompanied the Reuben James to “the cold ocean floor.” He was told no one would be interested in such a song. That sounds terrible, but it was no doubt true and good advice.

Those who are most moved visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or the Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism During World War II in Washington DC or the National September 11 Memorial in New York city are the men, women and children who reach up to touch the carved names of family members or friends. They are disposed to respond personally.

What *Half-Life of War* can do is to get us to think of each and every name on all our war memorials as somebody’s son, brother, father, uncle or husband—and now daughter, sister, mother, aunt, wife or life partner. We can develop true empathy and sincere reverence for the dead. If that seems too big a task, imagine your own name or your son’s or grandson’s instead of Benjamin Scott’s on the stone where Henry’s camera captures:

KILLED
ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE
23.
NAMES AS FAR AS KNOWN
BENJ. SCOTT. DRUMMER BOY.

Tom Palaima, a MacArthur fellow for his work in Aegean prehistory and early Greek language and culture, is director of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory in the Department of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a regular commentary writer for the *Austin American-Statesman* and contributes to *The Texas Observer*, *Michigan War Studies Review*, NPR, and other outlets.