

"The Greatest Veneration: Questions for Friedrich St. Florian"
by Thomas Keenan

(this interview appeared in The New York Times Sunday Magazine, 7.1.01)

TK: Your design has certainly aroused a lot of controversy. But with Congress, the president and the courts now behind you, not to mention Bob Dole and Tom Hanks, it looks as if you're good to go. How do you feel about that?

I have been surrounded by this controversy for too long. I think after four and a half years of working on the memorial design and having now sort of received the go-ahead -- we're about to start construction after July 4 -- generally I prefer not to speak about the controversy anymore. But if it's at the civilized level, I have no problems.

TK: I'll try to stay civilized. Why do you think the controversy persists?

I think at this point the controversy is kind of self-perpetuating, quite frankly. There was some legitimate criticism at the beginning, but after that, it became less professional. The most nonsensical of it all is that our architecture is gigantic, that it is monumental -- and the reference was made to Nazi and Fascist architecture. But the hallmark of that particular architecture is that the dimensions that were proposed at the time are grotesquely immense. For instance, it has been said that our two arches, the memorial arches as we call them, are very tall. The Arc de Triomphe in Paris is 164 feet tall, and our memorial arches are 43 feet tall. So all of this is so totally blown out of proportion, it is very unfortunate.

TK: Washington is full of memorials. How did you see the special demands of a war memorial?

I remember saying that wars must not be glorified, but wars must be remembered. I'm very much aware of the differences of our time, in comparison to the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, there is an enormous awareness of the sacrifice of a war. When Napoleon returned, nobody asked him how many Frenchmen he left behind. The accounting of the sacrifice is, more than anything else, the attitude toward war memorials in our time.

We somewhat expanded the original mandate that was given to us -- namely to commemorate the fighting man, the man who won the war for America and for the world. We deliberately wanted to include the entire nation, the home front in particular. It is now very clear to everybody that our nation has never been as united as it was during World War II.

We wanted very much to celebrate that unity of the nation, that unique moment in our history.

TK: Can't we take the war for granted anymore? Do we need reminding about what it means?

The most important obligation for the memorial is to remind future generations of what the world war generation did: namely, to go to war and save the world. So that future generations feel compelled to do likewise. And that's easy to say but very difficult to do.

TK: Saving the world is not necessarily the most popular project these days.

No, it is actually rather unpopular today. And people would almost think that this is an inappropriate question even to ask. I think it is fair to say that during World War II there was a high sense of purpose. The country had a very clear vision of its own standing, of its own morality. It was not an ambiguous time. Today, we live in a world that is highly ambiguous, very fractured, with many of the historical, traditional values in a state of collapse, really. From a moral point of view, I think that period really constitutes a completely different time.

TK: There's a moral mission for the memorial?

No, I think that the memorial should not enter into this debate about morality and immorality. The most important thing for the memorial was really to make it timeless. The architecture will fit splendidly into Washington. It has that timeless quality that the other memorials have. The memorial plaza will be the most beautiful public space in our capital city. We have incorporated a lot of fountains, and the joyfulness

and the pleasure of all these waterworks is probably the thing we're the proudest of. That's the legacy.

TK: A joyful war memorial.

Well, the legacy is, after all, joyful. I think Senator Dole said it once very beautifully: there is no such thing as a good war. There's a good cause, but there's no such thing as a good war. War is cruel; it's brutal; it's a terrible thing. We should not have wars anymore.