Casey Blake Contends WWII Memorial At Odds With Modesty of Generation it Honors

BY JAMES DEVITT

When site preparation for the World War II Memorial began this August on the Mall in Washington, D.C., critics of the project renewed their concerns about the memorial’s location and structure.

“The memorial has generated significant controversy for a number of reasons,” said history professor Casey Blake, director of the program in American Studies and a specialist in intellectual and cultural history. “With its sheer size and the claim it will make on public space, it will really transform the Mall.

“In addition, it is in its design reminiscent of the official art work sponsored in the 1930s by regimes on the left, right and center from Stalin’s Soviet Union, to Hitler’s Nazi Germany and Roosevelt’s New Deal America. The echoes of those works that some see in the aesthetics of the World War II Memorial have left many uneasy.

“Critters of the memorial counter that the project’s design complements the neo-classic style of Washington architecture.

However, Blake expressed a different type of concern about the project: that the memorial itself conflicts with the contributions and character of the World War II generation.

“With its sheer size and the bombastic aesthetics, seem strangely at odds with the relative modesty of the World War II generation,” Blake said of the memorial, which will be 384 ft. long and 279 ft. wide when it opens in the spring of 2004. “I think one of most admirable features of this generation is its modesty, particularly compared to people who served in wars before it and the baby boomers who came after it.”

“Crediting other historians, Blake added that the true memorial to the World War II generation were the numerous public works created by that generation in post-World War II America. These include the federal highway system, public schools and public colleges and universities.

“These are remarkable achievements,” said Blake, who is currently in Washington, D.C., on fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery to study the politics of public art.

While former U.S. Senator Robert Dole, a World War II veteran, is chairman of the memorial’s fund-raising effort, Blake said the driving force behind its creation is the baby-boom generation. These include baby-boomers such as Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, the respective director and star of “Saving Private Ryan,” which depicted the 1944 D-Day invasion and graphically portrayed the sacrifices made by American soldiers in World War II.

“I think the baby-boom generation is building this in honor of its own reconciliation with its fathers,” said Blake. “This seems to me to be a Tom Hanks—Steven Spielberg memorial, not one the World War II veterans would have created themselves.”

Blake added that while baby boomers seek to honor the World War II generation through the memorial, they have scaled back the investment in public amenities that had characterized their parents’ contribution to American society after the war.

“The baby-boom generation has presided over the unpacking of the public sector and disinvestment in public institutions,” he said.


For more information on the World War II Memorial, go to www.wwimemorial.com.

The World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., as it will appear upon completion in 2004. Site preparation for the project began in August.

BY KATE SZUMANSKI

An estimated 38,000 families were cut off from welfare assistance on Nov. 30 when federal time limits expired. This comes at an especially difficult time as jobs in the city are more scarce than they have been in years.

This means low income families could become more vulnerable according to a report released earlier this month by Columbia’s National Center for Children in Poverty Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism.

The report, “Policies Affecting New York City’s Low-Income Families,” highlights the urgency of the issues facing the city’s most vulnerable families.

The report reviews New York City’s progress in implementing welfare reform since 1996 and highlights several practical areas where the city can do more to help its most vulnerable low-income families.

“Including all New Yorkers as we recover and rebuild New York City will be an issue of tremendous importance for the next mayor,” said Barbara B. Blum, co-author of the report, director of the Research Forum and senior lecturer at the Mailman School of Public Health. The report offers several concrete recommendations to city, state, and federal policymakers to help make the next phase of welfare reform throughout the five boroughs more effective.

‘New York City has in just a few years made commendable progress in transforming its welfare system from one that emphasized provision of cash assistance to one that seeks to help people support their families by working,’ said Hugh O’Neill, a co-author of the report and president and founder of Applesseed, Inc.

“The transformation is not yet completed, and we are entering a period where the challenges we face may be greater,” Blum and O’Neill note that a slowdown in the city’s economy—already evident before the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center—will imperil the progress the city has made in moving people from welfare to work.

According to a report released by NYC Comptroller Alan G. Hevesi on Oct. 4, the city could lose an estimated 115,300 jobs this fiscal year as a result of the attack. The repercussions of the attack could also cost the city’s economy between $90 billion and $105 billion over the next two years. The immense impact of the Sept. 11 tragedy on the city’s economy makes the challenges described in the NCCP report even greater and more urgent.

Blum notes that despite dramatic declines in New York’s overall welfare caseload and with the federal time limits on individual cash assistance, thousands of low income people are likely to lose much needed support services. At the same time, more children not