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Cultural Commentary: The Names of the War Dead

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During political campaigns we are flooded with two sorts of information about the condition of Americans. Collective data, information about large numbers of people, is presented to us in poverty rates (15.3% in the U.S. as of 2006), income averages ($48K median for U.S. households in 2006) and unemployment rates (4.6% of Americans as of 2007). If the United States Census Bureau has done a good job, then we can assume they are accurate figures, if lacking a bit in the human touch. That, however, is where our stories about the lives of individuals are most useful. Political speeches and advertisements typically include the names and faces of Americans whose individual stories give force and life to the broader statistics.

Sometimes, these collective and individual forms of information seem to struggle with one another for our attention. For years I have been seeing data about the Americans killed in our military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The rates and numbers in magazines and newspapers, the faces and names scrolling silently across the television screen after nightly newscasts. Recently, I found an alphabetical listing of the names and home towns of those American dead, according to the official American military, numbering just over 4,200 as of the writing of this article. (The number will, of course, be higher by the time this edition of Bridgewater Review is published.) As a nation we should try to grasp both the scale of these losses, and the individuality of their sacrifices. We would like to try here.

I am privileged to be given two pages in each edition of Bridgewater Review to explore a topic of my choosing. In this case, we have asked our designer, Donna Stepien, to scale the print size of the names and home towns of these American dead to fit in those two pages, while still being recognizable as print. The list is produced here.
My experience of seeing this list brings to mind my first visit to the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. soon after it was completed in 1982. I went to find the name of Bobby Meeker, a high school buddy of mine who was killed in Binh Duong in 1969. Just as Maya Lin intended when she designed the memorial, I had to walk past thousands of names to find Bobby’s, and soon I was dwarfed by the dark and ever taller wall. There were more than 58,000 Americans killed in Viet Nam, and Bobby’s name was deep among them. How are we to sense both the scale and these losses and the intensely individual lives that comprise them? However difficult it is, we should try.

—William C. Levin is Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.