



Honor. Heal. Empower. Unite.

By [Henry Howard](#)

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The nation’s memorial to the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) should be designed by a veteran. Or a Gold Star Mother. Or the winner of a design competition.

Michael “Rod” Rodriguez, who is leading the effort to have the memorial erected on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., has heard those suggestions and countless others. But the president and CEO of the Global War on Terrorism Memorial Foundation has a different take on who should spearhead the design: GWOT veterans and their families.

Last September, the foundation sought public input on the design of the memorial, receiving nearly 20,000 submissions. A group of artists is now incorporating some of those ideas and will work with a design advisory council on the concept. The goal is to unveil the memorial’s design and break ground in 2025.

“I’m an artist, not an expert in the Global War on Terrorism,” says Rodriguez, a former Green Beret who was medically retired from the Army due to combat injuries in 2013. “I don’t speak for everybody’s experience. I have 55 friends who were killed. I still don’t know what that’s like. It would be very arrogant of me to think I do. I would still want to talk to other people. From there, let’s inspire the artists and design teams.”

In addition to creativity, Rodriguez puts a high value on service to others. “That’s my passion, and it fell right in line with how I was raised,” he says. “It also fills a primal need humans have. We are tribal in nature. If we didn’t serve our tribe, we never would’ve made it out of the cave. We wouldn’t have evolved to planning trips to Mars and other once-unthinkable goals.”

Family tradition. A member of American Legion Post 1981 in North Carolina, Rodriguez is proud of his family’s tradition of military service. His father was a Vietnam War veteran. Both grandfathers and all his great-uncles served in World War II. His oldest son is on his fourth deployment with the 82nd Airborne, while his youngest son is set to join the military after graduating high school this year.

“Apple trees make apples,” he says proudly.

His years in uniform shaped Rodriguez and his continuing mission to serve others, including in his leadership role at the foundation.

He recalls his first deployment, as an 18-year-old Army private, to Somalia in 1993. His job was to escort food convoys to malnourished Somalis, many of whom were orphans.

“I learned in the United States military, very early in my career, that we don’t just hunt down bad guys,” he says. “As part of the 10th Mountain Division, I was out there providing sustenance and hope for a population just hoping to live to that afternoon. Hoping to make it through the night and the next day.”

Even as Rodriguez advanced to become a Green Beret sniper and a medic, his passion for helping others remained a priority. “I was doing the same thing in villages all over the world: providing basic care to people,” he says. “Penicillin still works in certain parts of the world. Give it to a 2-year-old child who’s got an infection and they’ll live. That’s tremendous.”

Four tenets. The Global War on Terrorism Memorial will represent the service and sacrifice of post-9/11 veterans and their families. The design will be based on four tenets, words chosen from discussions in 2018:

- Honor. “Honoring all those who serve. We have to start with those who lost their lives. The first KIA in the Global War on Terrorism was Johnny Micheal Spann. He worked for the CIA Special Activities Division and was a Marine. We had other agencies and individuals, fighting side by side. What about them? There were over 3,400 non-uniformed individuals who lost their lives. That’s almost half the number of uniformed servicemembers we have lost. That’s astounding. Think about them. Think about those families. There are also the invisible wounds of war. We need to talk about that. Some of our brothers and sisters are losing their war with suicide. We’re honoring all those who serve and their families. They are part of this.”
- Heal. “Healing can be interpreted in a number of ways. Sometimes that’s personal. A lot of us are still healing from our service, whether that be physical or not. Then there are relationships ... Maybe it’s your family. We’re also healing as a nation. There are still men and women out there willing to do everything they possibly can to defend and protect this beautiful, great nation of ours. That’s very important.”
- Empower. “When I started working on this project in 2016, the people who pushed back almost immediately were the veteran community: ‘Why? We don’t need that.’ We need to empower them to understand what they did. Give them that voice. Empower them to tell these stories, these millions of stories of service and their own experiences.”
- Unite. “Remember, we are still engaged in a difficult-to-define, multigenerational war. We’ve lost five servicemembers this year: three reservists from Georgia and two frogmen, the oldest of which, Chris Chambers, I knew. He was No. 55 of my friends. They’re still fighting. We need to remind everybody about the strength of our nation and who we were on Sept. 12. United.”

Next steps. The foundation’s 24-step quest to build the memorial began well before the 20-year war in Afghanistan ended.

Rodriguez joined the foundation board in 2016, the year after its creation. Buoyed by The American Legion’s support through a national resolution, the memorial got the green light in 2017.

“We wouldn’t be here where we are, with the authorization to build this memorial on the National Mall, without The American Legion,” he says. “The American Legion was one of our first allies to stand beside us.”

The foundation is currently working on steps 13 through 19, which include raising funds and receiving design approval from the Commission of Fine Arts, National Capital Planning Commission and National Capital Non-Advisory Commission.

“We’ll take our design to them,” Rodriguez says. “This is what we would like to build. This is what we envision. This is what we would like. All of our artists, as we continue to build the team, understand that we’re going to present something and we may have to adapt it. We’re always transparent and open (about) everything we’re doing.”

Future plans. Looking ahead to the 2027 dedication, Rodriguez pauses. “No one’s asked me that question yet: ‘What’s it going to be like for you on dedication day?’” he repeats. “Maybe I’ll hit that moment of clarity. But I’m going to be really proud of our nation for doing this. I’m the full magnet, but it’s just not my memorial. I will have a lot of emotions on that day, and I know I will not have done this alone.”

After the pomp and circumstance, the Global War on Terrorism Memorial will take its rightful place in the nation’s capital among memorials to Americans who served in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Gulf War.

“We will be positioned uniquely in that it’s going to maintain its reality as time progresses on,” he says.

After the memorial’s dedication, Rodriguez and his team plan to focus on educational programming and engagement opportunities. “That’s when the empowerment piece of our four tenets will really take off,” he says. “We will continue to tell these stories and continue to educate and inform. We have one mission. We will have the opportunity to continue to engage past, current and future generations.”

Rodriguez envisions virtual and in-person engagement. “We’re not just going to say, ‘OK, we’re done. Let’s move out.’ We will endeavor. We’re going to have a tremendously active presence with the millions of visitors we’re going to get every year, and uphold our four tenets.

“We’re also looking to what we can do digitally. How can we start improving this to where there’s engagement all over the world? What type of experience will classes have when they visit? Is there something else we can add? We’ve got a big pot of gumbo brewing right now with a lot of ideas. All those will really start taking shape in the next couple of years.”