Testimony on the New Monumental Arch at Memorial Circle

National Capital Planning Commission, File 8778, November 5, 2026

Chair and members of the Commission, my name is Dennis Findley. I am an architect in McLean, Virginia, and a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. For 37 years, I have crossed Memorial Bridge more times than I can count. I oppose approval of the arch.

Memorial Bridge was the final link in one of America's great ceremonial compositions, more than a century in the making.

Arlington House, finished in 1818, was sited so its great Doric portico could be seen from Washington. The McMillan Plan of 1902 drew an axis from that house to the site of the Lincoln Memorial, dedicated in 1922. The 1924 bridge plan the administration cites proposed two slender columns to frame that view, not an arch to block it. Memorial Bridge opened in 1932, deliberately kept low and horizontal. Nothing was meant to stand between the house and Lincoln. Since 1963, President Kennedy's eternal flame has kept vigil on that axis, just below the house. For decades I have watched it from the bridge at night. His grave was placed to look out across the river to Lincoln. The arch would rise in the middle of both views, overwhelming what generations so carefully shaped and preserved.

At 250 feet, the arch would be more than twice the height of the Lincoln Memorial and directly on that axis. Even Napoleon's Arc de Triomphe is only 164 feet tall, and it stands where twelve grand avenues meet. In Paris, the arch is the destination. Here, the destinations are Lincoln and Arlington House, and this arch would stand between them. From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Arlington House would be reduced to a keyhole view through the arch.

The arch would also change what Arlington National Cemetery means. The final plans call it a "ceremonial gateway," and the Interior Department says it will "enhance the visitor experience" at Arlington "for veterans, [and] the families of the fallen." I am the son of a disabled Korean War veteran. His war ended not in triumph but in stalemate. I have often stood graveside at Arlington with grieving families. What I witnessed there had nothing to do with triumph. It was about loss. Triumphal arches were built in the name of victory, but from Rome to Napoleon's Paris they honored the ruler who built them. Arlington is about no one person. It belongs to those who served, and too often gave everything. Arlington already has a ceremonial gateway. It is Memorial Bridge.

The administration has told a federal court that construction could begin as early as the day of your vote. Two federal lawsuits are pending, and Congress has not authorized this arch under the Commemorative Works Act. There is no reason to rush. I ask the Commission to deny final approval or, at a minimum, defer it until those questions are resolved.

Great civic landscapes endure because each generation acts as a steward, not an author. I ask you to be stewards. Thank you.

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