Architects decry ‘brutal’ changes in Korean War memorial design

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WASHINGTON — The architects who designed a new Korean War veterans memorial say that federal bureaucrats “brutally changed” their design and intend to build a “radically different” memorial that “glorifies war.”

The fight over the design of the memorial, which is to be built on Washington’s mall directly across the reflecting pool from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, is becoming a battle over the way in which the Korean War will be remembered.

The architects’ design won a national competition when a 10-member jury of Korean War veterans selected the work over that of 540 competitors last year.

It depicted, with heroic statuary and subtle symbols, a unit of 38 soldiers on patrol upon a mountain ridge, struggling to survive and come home alive. Home is represented by an American flag flying beyond the highest point of the ridge.

But it has been subjected to “total changes” by a half-dozen federal agencies and retired military officials, said John Paul Lucas, a principal of Burns Lucas, Leon, Lucas, an architectural firm in State College, Pa.

The revised memorial “has taken on a radically different character…one that has to do with a moment in combat,” Lucas said. “It would be a battle.”

Sketches of the new design, obtained yesterday, bear only a passing resemblance to the original. They include ceremonial plazas, murals, maps, pools and other elements.

The winning architects have protested the changes in their design, to no avail.

In a statement delivered to the White House last month, they said the altered plan “glorifies war,” and is out of joint with its surroundings: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument.

A model of the winning design was unveiled last year by President Bush in a solemn White House ceremony. Bush said the memorial would represent an “American victory.”

About 54,000 Americans died in the undeclared war between 1950 and 1953. The war ended with Korea divided, as it is today. Most historians depict the war as a bloody stalemate.

Pictores of the model unveiled last year have been sent to thousands of veterans in a private fund-raising effort for the memorial. But the picture of the model bears little resemblance to the memorial now planned.

“It is not what will be built,” said Col. William E. Ryan Jr., director of operations and finance at the American Battle Monuments Commission, which is responsible for national war memorials and which has final authority over the design.

Lucas said he and his partners were “put into isolation, told not to say anything” by federal officials when the architects wanted to make changes in the design.

“Our mission was to honor American servicemen and women,” Lucas said. “If prior to entering the competition we had thought that our design, should it win, would be changed without our consent and then used to raise millions of dollars for some other design, we never would have entered.”

William Lecky, president of Cooper-Lecky Architects, the Washington firm that is carrying out the changes in the memorial, called the dispute over the design “a political quagmire.”

Cooper-Lecky also executed politically controversial design changes in the Vietnam memorial, adding larger-than-life statues of soldiers to the stark black stone memorial etched with the names of the war dead.

“That was a can of worms too, but of a very different nature,” Lecky said. The original Vietnam memorial design was opposed by some veterans groups as insufficiently heroic, but has become one of Washington’s most revered monuments.

Maya Lin, the artist who designed the original Vietnam memorial, said in a telephone interview from New York that she sympathized with the original designers of the memorial to the Korean War. “I would question the whole notion that someone wins a design competition and then has no choice” over how the design is realized, she said.

Lecky said changes in the Korean War memorial design were ordered by the American Battle Monuments Commission, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Korean War Veterans Memorial Advisory Board, headed by retired Army Gen. Richard Stilwell, a former commander of U.S. forces in Korea and a former CIA operative in Southeast Asia.

The Army Corps of Engineers wanted — and will receive — one completely new element in the revised memorial: a large mural that will “define and elaborate on the history of the war,” Lecky said.

The American Battle Monuments Commission wanted “a stronger recognition of the commitment of those