

Synthesis practice: 'coffin photos'

Recently US Defense Secretary Robert Gates lifted a long-standing ban on the media's use of photos showing the coffins of fallen US soldiers arriving home. The ban, and the lifting of it, are both controversial issues for many Americans.

Read the following sources and any accompanying information carefully. Then, in an essay that synthesizes at least three sources for support, take a position that defends, challenges, or qualifies Secretary Gates' lifting of the ban.

Refer to the sources as Source A, Source B, etc., or by the descriptions in the parentheses. Publication data is included for your convenience.

Source A (ABC News Online)

Source B (www.oregonlive.com)

Source C (Washington Times)

Source D (www.blackfive.net)

Source E ('The Tank' on www.nationalreview.com)

Source F (US Department of Defense)

Source G (Minneapolis–St. Paul Star-Tribune)

Source A

US lifts ban on photos of war dead

Fri Feb 27, 2009

The Pentagon has decided to lift a ban on media coverage of the return of flag-draped coffins of fallen US soldiers from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The decision by Defense Secretary Robert Gates will allow photos of the coffins arriving at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, on the condition that families of the dead soldiers agree.

Images of honor guards carrying the coffins from the bellies of military transport planes had been a grim symbol of the Vietnam War, and a graphic reminder of the mounting casualties.

The ban on media coverage of casualties began under former President George Bush during the first Gulf war in 1990-1991.

A recent poll showed a majority of Americans backed the lifting of the ban, with 67 per cent saying the public should be allowed to see video and photos of the coffins returning.

Dr Gates ordered a review of the ban earlier this month at the prompting of President Barack Obama.

"From a personal standpoint, I think, if the needs of the families can be met, and the privacy concerns can be addressed, the more honor we can accord these fallen heroes, the better," Dr Gates had said upon launching the review.

The Dover base is the site of the military's largest mortuary.

Source B

Let families decide about coffin photos

How do you bring home the true cost of war to a public largely detached from it?

One way is to allow photos of the military dead being carried off at Dover Air Force Base. Little wonder that

Americans who've thought most deeply about the cost of war -- Gov. Ted Kulongoski, for instance -- tend to support lifting the ban at Dover.

They're glad President Barack Obama is reviewing the ban. Documentation at Dover is one way for Americans to share in the sacrifice, Kulongoski said Wednesday. The ex-Marine shares the sacrifice in an even deeper way. Standing in for the rest of us, he goes to the funerals of Oregonians killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As of Wednesday, he'd gone to 92.

The ban on photographing flag-draped coffins, in place since 1991, cannot truly disguise the reality of war -- or not for long anyway. But the ban does help to cloud the public's view. And any obfuscation is hard to defend in light of the war in Iraq, where the public was misled about so much.

The government maximized the rationale for going to war, and minimized the cost and number of soldiers needed to fight it. Although the ban predates the war, it reflects a kneejerk view -- both condescending and corrosive of democracy -- that Americans can't stomach the truth.

We reject that notion. And the related idea, as well, that no war can pass "the Dover test."

Nonsense. News outlets have, after all, found many other ways to tell the story; the ban, in some cases, may have actually pushed them to be more creative. Particularly effective, for instance, is the honor roll appended to "The News Hour with Jim Lehrer."

After the news cast, photos of men and women who've died in Iraq and Afghanistan -- 4,821, as of Wednesday -- file by in silence. Photos of coffins are not any more powerful or eloquent than these faces, some drawn from high-school yearbooks.

Let's acknowledge right here, though, that lifting the ban may be more complicated than it once sounded.

What no one wants is to put any further strain on military families, and the Dover ban must be evaluated with that in mind. One problem Oregonians can appreciate is whether lifting it would make family members feel they're now compelled to show up in Delaware -- a continent away -- to greet their relative.

That would be an unfortunate side effect of lifting it. Families are likely to feel as differently about this question, of course, as they do about every other aspect of the war. But, sadly, some could not afford to make the trip, and they might feel they were short-changing or disrespecting their loved one.

Some families of the dead see coverage as intrinsically undignified; others see the lack of coverage as disrespectful. The new Obama administration is, wisely, making a push for transparency. But the right thing to do in this case is to leave the decision up to soldiers themselves in consultation with their families. They have to prepare for other death-related questions when they sign up to serve, and they should be asked this one, too.

We should allow photographs, so long as the people who are paying the highest price for the war regard the coverage not as an intrusion or violation, but as a salute to their sacrifice.

Source C

Keep casket photo ban, vets say

Veterans groups are adamant -- the flag-draped caskets of fallen troops should not be turned into yet another photo op.

Both the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars on Tuesday condemned a proposal to lift restrictions that now prevent the press from photographing caskets as they arrive home from wars overseas.

"There is nothing to discuss. Photographing the caskets containing the remains of men and women who have made the supreme sacrifice on behalf of our country and its freedoms is little short of sacrilege," said David K. Rehbein, national commander of the American Legion.

"The practice would be intrusive and hurtful to the warriors' families. The return of fallen heroes is also a sacred moment for our armed forces," he said. "Our fallen warriors deserve to be honored without compromise and not made the object of a media event or be made vulnerable to exploitation for propagandistic purposes."

Jerry Newberry, spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, echoed Mr. Rehbein's sentiments. "We continue to support the ban on photographing caskets out of respect for the dead," he said.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates ordered a review of the policy after President Obama noted last week that he would consider some changes. The media ban was first imposed by President George H.W. Bush in 1991 during the Persian Gulf War, primarily to protect the privacy of families gathered at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to receive their loved one's remains.

The policy became a strident political issue in 2004 after stark, unauthorized photos of flag-covered caskets were published by the Seattle Times and on the Internet. The images were obtained from a private defense contractor who snapped pictures on a cargo plane, and through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit filed against the U.S. Air Force.

President George W. Bush upheld the ban, though the issue was raised by Democrats who were convinced that Mr. Bush was trying to lessen the impact of war dead during the 2004 presidential campaign.

"The truth is on the line," his campaign rival, Sen. John Kerry, Massachusetts Democrat, said at the time.

The National Press Photographers Association supports lifting the ban, noting in a Feb. 10 letter to Mr. Obama that it "violates the principles of free speech and free exchange of ideas for which these very heroes have died."

The New York Times and other newspapers also want the ban rescinded in the name of transparency.

"Newspapers seek to commemorate the war dead by running photos of their often-smiling faces. The country should also see the reality of their coffins," said a Times editorial Feb. 15.

In August, Rep. Walter B. Jones, North Carolina Republican, introduced "The Fallen Hero Commemoration Act," which would grant press access to commemoration ceremonies, memorial services and the arrival of caskets to "honor those who have given their lives in defense of our nation."

Source D

...not one of my fallen brothers, and not any of my friends in the war zones now, would ever want their death to be used by the media, their families, or anyone else that might reduce their sacrifice or the effort to win the war. ...

And who in the Army requested the change?

It took me a good hour and a walk in the rain to calm down enough to publish this post.

Why?

[Because it's Code Pink and other anti-war outfits](#) that are pressuring the government (the articles all state pressure from politicians and "[a leading military families' group](#)").

Yes, the family has to authorize the taking of the photo. That seems like a reasonable enough control mechanism doesn't it?

It would if no one would ever abuse those photos. Do you really believe that Code Pink and the other organizations responsible for this reversal of policy will respect the intent of the new policy?

These are the same people that held signs outside of Walter Reed at night when the buses of wounded troops rolled in (I saw the sign) that said: "You got maimed for a lie."

So what about the soldier's wishes?

Don't they matter as much, if not more, in this case?

Or are we just going to provide "*a sobering reminder to all Americans*"?

When the first soldier's flag draped casket appears among all the hate sites, you can bet we will mobilize. Just because a fallen soldier can't defend himself is no excuse to abuse their memory. And that does not mean

that there aren't millions of us to step up and protect his sacrifice.
As McQ said eloquently in his post: [IT'S ABOUT FAMILY](#).
Our family deserves dignity and respect.

Source E

The first national article I read on the decision yesterday contained a line that I have failed to find in subsequent reports, nor have I found again the original report. But in the first paragraph it contained an objection that was quite revealing. I am paraphrasing from memory here, but absolutely confident in the recollection. After noting the decision as a victory for the media, who have long simply wanted to "honor the fallen troops," the article noted objections from the media regarding the requirement of permission from families because it "made it nearly impossible to photograph the planeloads of flag-draped coffins arriving at Dover."

That early graph is quite telling. If the aim is to honor the fallen, then with the permission of the surviving family, the best way to honor a fallen American man or woman is to capture their individual coffin and procession. Name them. Explain who they were, what they did, why and where they served. That's honoring them.

But most of the media simply doesn't want to get dragged out to individual funeral processions. It's quite a bother. Instead, their objectives are often disconnected from honor and instead focused on journalism critical of war efforts.

Don't take my word for it. Look at the coverage of the Iraq war sans images of draped coffins. How many soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines were you introduced to? How many reports of individual stories of sacrifice, courage and honor did you hear? How many of the fallen did you actually get to know as they were dutifully honored by the national media?

Now, contrast that struggle with how many times you have read daily and cumulative U.S. body counts on the morning paper's front page, heard the numbers on the radio on the way to work, or seen the figures displayed on the evening news?

Quite a revealing exercise, no? Well, images of groups of coffins being unloaded from the backs of military cargo planes at Dover are the graphic equivalent of the same: body count. Rarely is that image intended to honor. If it were, there would be some honoring within the accompanying text of precisely who rests beneath the Colors, what they did, and how they served.

So those who object to the family permission requirement being applied to media photography of both the Dover arrivals and the individual ceremonies at the resting places of the fallen can, quite frankly, pound sand.

When it comes to protecting and respecting our fallen brothers-in-arms from self-serving media exploiters, we do not operate with "no-income-verification loans." We've followed your history and find you with a record of bankruptcy and unworthy of credit.

Seriously. Pound sand.



Source F

Undated photo, released by the US Department of Defense: flag-draped coffins of US war casualties aboard a cargo plane in Dover, Delaware.



Source G

Gates' Decision on Dover is a Good One— One Many Families Will Embrace

February 27, 2009

Secretary Gates' decision to lift the absolute ban on photographing coffins at Dover is long overdue. While a lot of families will take the responsibility for determining whether or not to allow photographers and journalists to report on their child's or spouse's death, a lot of others will embrace the opportunity.

[Larry Burrows](#), whose Vietnam War photography ran in LIFE magazine, once received a letter from a woman whose dead son he had shown in a photograph. She sent it to him after she had seen a subsequent piece he'd done, showing even more U.S. and Vietnamese dead. He wrote of it:

"She said she had just seen another story which I did for the magazine. And she didn't understand what I was trying to do or what I was trying to say--to be able to photograph death, to photograph the suffering. She said: 'Now I understand, because of this last particular story which ran.' And she said, 'I want to thank you for whatever help you gave my son, Jim, during the last moments of his life.'"

Burrows was famous for his aid to the soldiers he covered (often risking, and ultimately losing, his life in doing so)--and it should be noted that more than 100 journalists have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. These men and women are stakeholders in telling the story, too. Preventing them--and the families of the dead--from trying to tell the truth they experienced, and sharing the grief they're dealing with, is wrong.

The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (the largest veterans' group from the GWOT) [saluted the new policy](#) when it was released yesterday. It's often said that every soldier experiences a different war... and now we'll be better able to know a deeper, darker range of that experience--and be better for it.