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Dignity Where It's Due

By Elizabeth L. Robbins

WEST POINT, N.Y. -- The recent decision to enforce a 12-year-old policy limiting camera coverage of the remains of American servicemen and servicewomen being returned to this country has brought much criticism. Because the public no longer views metal coffins being taken from airplanes at Dover Air Force Base, and rows of flag-draped coffins in the aircraft hangars there, critics accuse the administration of hiding the true costs of war. I disagree. I think that the denial of access to such scenes at Dover is a wise policy beneficial to both the public and members of the military.

Here at West Point, the global war on terror is both immediate and remote. Hundreds of our recent students are now lieutenants leading platoons into harm's way. E-mails from far-off battlefields pass swiftly between officers and cadets -- their humor and pain fill us with pride, envy and a measure of private relief. After this tour, or after graduation, we will serve together again. For now, we study, and we scrutinize the news.

On Oct. 31 the war came to West Point. As a community volunteer, I assisted in the wrenching memorial and burial of 1st Lt. David Bernstein, class of 2001, killed by hostile fire in Iraq. That Sunday the New York Times published a front-page picture of his coffin and honor guard, and a moving tribute noting his valor while wounded and under fire. This reporting on a wonderful man, now lost, is fully appropriate.

But there is another kind of coverage that mutes meaning and makes such sacrifice anonymous. That is my problem with Dover: It presents images of multiple, identical coffins in a way that diminishes the individual tragedy of each death. Such pictures are devoid of any meaning beyond the idea that the country is at war and wars kill. They become ammunition for advocates of one viewpoint or another at the expense of honor being paid to the individual dead. It is demeaning to soldiers and desensitizing to the public to use sacred remains as a backdrop.

Soldiers want the media to report combat casualties. We want the public to be aware of the human costs of carrying out the nation's will. We believe in our leaders, believe that our lives will not be expended heedlessly or without meaning, and this is what motivates us to put country before family and self. But should we be killed, each of us modestly expects solemn recognition of our sacrifice. From living within military culture, we know that our remains will be treated with dignity, our essence memorialized, and, we trust, accurately represented in the mass media.

There is much to be gained by reflective, individualized coverage of war dead. In our armed forces of 2.6 million active-duty, Guard, and Reserve, a combat death is still a rare event and accorded the enormous respect due legitimate heroes. As a nation, we draw inspiration and resolve from those who serve and sacrifice on our behalf.

News accounts of combat deaths will question whether the loss was avoidable. This is welcome to those of us in uniform. Such questions help foster progress in an institution that, while

constantly assessing its own performance, is in many ways not well equipped to cultivate rapid change. External oversight can help improve protective equipment, weapons systems, force protection doctrine and intelligence systems.

In fact, I believe that because of the restrictions on images from Dover, Americans actually get better news coverage of this conflict. Of necessity, pictures are now collected at the local level, where single coffins are shown at individual funeral ceremonies. Surviving comrades, family and friends are able to give voice to the memory of the deceased or, if they so choose, to grieve in private. Instead of impersonal rows of war dead, the cities and small towns of America accurately contextualize the latest terrible loss.

The images from Dover would add little to all this. From initial casualty reports to memorial services held abroad and individual funerals in this country, the country's losses receive extensive coverage. The New York Times routinely honors individual casualties. The Washington Post covers every interment at Arlington National Cemetery to which families permit access. Local papers, television and radio report on all local losses. Each story is fresh, and painful.

In short, the Dover policy forces the press to report the real stories, the individual stories of service and sacrifice -- not as an implied indictment of national policy but in honor of those who have fallen.

I'm grateful for this policy. It was born not of governmental malice or obfuscation but of a worthwhile refusal to debate the merits of national policy at the expense of proper and fitting recognition for our fellow citizen-soldiers as individuals -- recognition that our fallen deserve.

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