

Media Coverage at Dover a Family Decision

VFW National Commander-in-Chief Glen Gardner addresses Dover media ban

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How come nothing becomes an issue until the news media declares it an issue?

Take for example the 1991 policy barring the press from covering arrival ceremonies of American war dead at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, which was lifted Thursday.

The media cried foul when the Dover ban was enacted during the first Gulf war, then again in 2004, when Web site editor Russ Kick posted 288 photos of flag-draped transfer cases he obtained from a Freedom of Information Act request. After lying dormant for five years, the issue again resurfaced after CNN reporter Ed Henry asked President Obama about it at a Feb. 9 White House press conference.

As the Pentagon implements the new policy, I would like to offer Defense Secretary Robert Gates two thoughts before his public affairs experts wade too deep into the weeds:

- (1) What do the families want?
- (2) Do what the families want.

My organization, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, supports the ban because the return of America's fallen warriors is not a media event. Yet the final say on the ban did not to belong to the VFW or the Defense Department or the news media; the final say rightfully belongs with the families. How they choose to honor the life, service and sacrifice of their fallen loved ones should be their decision and their decision alone.

Critics of the photo ban have maintained that the issue at stake is whether the American people are getting a full picture of the costs of war. In a country where only seven-tenths of 1 percent of the population wears the uniform, I maintain that those Americans who are in this war – the military and their families – know the true picture.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Critics have also contended that the ban is a form of censorship. I prefer to call it exclusionism. A free press serves a great purpose in a democratic society, but with that constitutional right is a public responsibility to not blur the lines with parochial agendas.

But regardless of the thrust and parry between policy critics and defenders, the focus must still return to the families of the fallen.

Unless you have worn the uniform, no one in America can ever fully appreciate the sense of purpose – and of oneness – that exists within our armed forces. The families of our fallen know that no one treats the return of their loved ones with more tenderness or reverence than their brothers and sisters in uniform. No one.

The arrival ceremonies are solemn and dignified, and one of the final steps before a fallen warrior returns home. Allowing the press to cover these arrivals at Dover is an unnecessary complication – an unnecessary intrusion – with no value added.

For the media, I want to know how these fallen warriors lived, not about how his or her flag-draped transfer case was indistinguishable from the others that may have been aboard the flight. Tell me about the flag-lined boulevards and patriotic escorts they received in their hometowns, and about their families, whose hopes and dreams have been reduced to photographs and memories.

Just don't tell me your story is incomplete because you could not get into Dover.

This commentary was published in the Feb. 27, 2009, edition of The Washington Times. See <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/feb/27/photo-ops-of-returning-fallen/print>.