

White House bans news coverage of coffins returning from Iraq

Bill Vann**23 October 2003**

The *Washington Post* reported Wednesday that the Bush administration has ordered the Pentagon to prevent any news coverage of the bodies of US troops being sent home from Iraq. The blackout on casualties is part of the attempt by the White House to recast the nightmare in Iraq as a “good news” story.

“Since the end of the Vietnam War, presidents have worried that their military actions would lose support once the public glimpsed the remains of US soldiers arriving at air bases in flag-draped coffins,” wrote the *Post*’s White House reporter Dana Milbank. “To this problem, the Bush administration has found a simple solution: It has ended the public dissemination of such images by banning news coverage and photography of dead soldiers’ homecomings on all military bases.”

In the post-Vietnam War era, the return of the remains of US military personnel killed overseas was generally treated as a solemn state occasion. The trauma over Vietnam and the deaths of more than 58,000 soldiers had forced a break with the policy that prevailed during that war, in which the phrase “sent home in a body bag” summed up the indifference exhibited by the US government toward the troops in the field.

Thus, President Jimmy Carter attended memorial ceremonies held at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, the site of the military’s largest mortuary, when bodies were brought back from the failed hostage rescue attempt in Iran. Reagan pinned medals on the coffins of US Marines killed in El Salvador and attended memorials for the 241 Marines who died in the Beirut barracks bombing. George Bush the elder paid similar homage to soldiers killed in Panama and Lebanon, while elaborate ceremonies were staged to greet returning caskets at Dover, Andrews Air Force Base, Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany and elsewhere.

The military command and the US government have never doubted the impact of these images. Army General Henry Shelton, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commented in 1999 that any US foreign military intervention would have to pass the “Dover test,” meaning

the public’s reaction to photographs and news footage of caskets coming off of military transport planes.

The present administration has decided that it will simply not take this test. Instead, it chides the news media for focusing on the killing and maiming of US military personnel in attacks by resistance forces—presently averaging 25 a day—not to mention the killing and wounding of Iraqi civilians. Instead, it insists that the print and broadcast news trumpet supposed accomplishments, like the issuing of a new US-designed currency.

For the most part, the big business media has complied, keeping its coverage of soldiers’ deaths to a minimum and not dwelling on funerals or the suffering of the families left behind.

While using aircraft carriers and massed ranks of soldiers and sailors as backdrops for his photo opportunities, Bush has treated the US soldiers in Iraq with contempt. There has never been an occupant of the White House so obviously indifferent to the deaths of American servicemen and women in combat as George W. Bush. With the Iraq death toll for US troops approaching 350, Bush has yet to attend a single funeral or memorial service.

Having acted on its own propaganda claims that the Iraqi people would greet the US occupiers as “liberators,” the administration failed to properly deploy or equip US forces for what has become an ever more hostile environment. At the same time, US servicemen and women have been subjected to abysmal living conditions, in large part because support services were contracted out to politically connected private firms that failed to deliver once it became clear that Iraq remained a war zone.

The treatment of soldiers who have been wounded or injured in Iraq is scandalous. Those released from military hospitals, in many cases disabled for life, have found to their shock and anger that they were billed for their hospital meals.

At Fort Stewart, Georgia, where Bush staged one of his post-invasion appearances, using returning troops as a prop, approximately 600 wounded and injured reservists are being

denied prompt medical care and housed under disgraceful conditions in World War II-era cinderblock barracks that lack running water or air-conditioning. Wounded soldiers are forced to walk 30 yards—in many cases on crutches—to a bug-infested communal latrine. They are obliged to buy their own toilet paper.

After several of the reservists revealed these conditions to the media, some 400 of the wounded men and women were lined up in formation Tuesday morning to be reprimanded by senior officers, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* reported Wednesday. “They said we’d be doing more cleaning up, more work, and to keep our mouths shut,” Sgt. Dennis Stewart, a Terre Haute, Indiana firefighter told the newspaper.

Who are these soldiers for whom the president and his administration demonstrate such disregard? Overwhelmingly, they are drawn from the working class, in many cases joining the military because they needed a job or money for their education.

Specialist Simeon Hunte, 23, of Orange, New Jersey was shot to death October 1 while on patrol in Al Khadra. He is survived by his wife, a one-and-a-half year old daughter and a newborn son he never saw. “Hunte attended Montclair State University but did not graduate. He joined the Army to get the financial assistance to reach his goal,” according to a press account of his death.

Analaura Esparza-Gutierrez, 21, was born in Monterrey, Mexico, immigrated to the US as a child of seven and was preparing to apply for US citizenship. An Army private, she was killed October 1 when a military convoy in which she was riding was hit by an explosive device and rocket-propelled grenades. She had attended Houston Community College in Texas, but joined the Army so that her parents would not have to sacrifice to pay her tuition. “She was always more worried about us than she was about herself,” her father said.

Sgt. David Travis Friedrich, 26, of Naugatuck, Connecticut was killed in a mortar attack on a US base near Baghdad September 20. His mother said he had enlisted in the reserves to help pay for his graduate courses at the University of New Haven. He also held a full-time job in a factory before he was called up for active duty.

Ryan Carlock, 25, of Colchester, Illinois, was killed in combat north of Baghdad on September 9. He joined the Army three years ago to earn a living to support his wife and two children and to get job training. “He was trying to figure out his next move, stay in or go to college,” his stepfather said.

A common thread runs through the biographies of the great majority of those who have lost their lives in the war and occupation in Iraq, one of struggle and sacrifice in the

face of a shrinking job market and spiraling college tuition fees. The gulf between them and the US president is so vast as to defy comparison. Bush’s admission and graduation from Yale University, like his avoidance of military service and the succession of well-paid sinecures that preceded his installation as president, were guaranteed by his family’s wealth and fame.

For Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld, as for Halliburton, Bechtel, ChevronTexaco and ConocoPhillips, the lives of these young people are eminently expendable, a small down payment in blood on what they hope will be a windfall in profits resulting from the seizure of Iraq’s oil reserves and the looting of the US treasury by means of vastly inflated “reconstruction” contracts.

For American working people, the deaths of these young men and women is a terrible tragedy and waste. These soldiers, like the American people as a whole, were dragged into an illegal war based on lies about nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and Baghdad-terrorist connections that were invented to cover up the Bush administration’s predatory objectives. They have been kept in Iraq nearly seven months after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime under conditions of rising popular hostility to what is plainly an exercise in US colonialism.

The Bush administration is notoriously given to the belief that image is all that matters and that it can carry out any criminal policy so long as it can drape it in the flag and count on a pliant media to conceal the truth. While it may be able to stop the cameras from filming the caskets unloaded at Dover air base, the bodies are still coming home from Iraq for burial in towns and cities from New York to California.

As it becomes clear to ever broader sections of the population that these deaths were unnecessary and the result of what can only be described as a criminal enterprise, the demand will inevitably grow for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and a settling of accounts with those responsible for the needless killing of both Iraqis and Americans.



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