

Pentagon censors images of US soldiers' coffins returning from Iraq

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The release this week of hundreds of photos of flag-draped coffins returning from Iraq has triggered a furor in the Pentagon and the White House.

For an administration that firmly believes it can mold public opinion by manipulating images and crafting lies, the widespread publication of these all-too-real images of the grim cost of the Iraq war came as an unwelcome shock.

The first of the photos—depicting a long row of coffins, three abreast, on a military transport plane—came from a civilian contract worker assigned to the Kuwait airport. After its appearance in the *Seattle Times*, she was summarily fired from her job.

Then hundreds of photographs were posted on the Web site *The Memory Hole* www.thememoryhole.org, which had obtained them through a Freedom of Information Act request. The Pentagon claimed that the release of the photos by an Air Force command was a “mistake” and refused to provide them to any other media outlets. Nonetheless, many newspapers took the photos off the Internet and published them Friday.

As for *The Memory Hole*, its Internet site was inaccessible Friday. It was not possible to ascertain whether it was because of a vast increase in traffic, deliberate sabotage or censorship.

The administration and the Pentagon had imposed a strict blackout on media coverage of the coffins returning to Dover, claiming that it is was meant to protect the privacy of the slain soldiers' families.

A civilian official at the Pentagon said that the military did not want “any kind of attention that is unwarranted or undignified.” White House press spokesman Scott McClellan said that the president's opposition to media coverage of the returning war dead was rooted in his determination to “show respect for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.”

This from a White House that has spliced into its campaign commercials footage of New York City firefighters carrying a flag-draped body out of the ruins of the World Trade Center!

As for the soldiers' families, not a few of them have complained bitterly that they are also prohibited from meeting the planes carrying the bodies of their loved ones killed in Iraq.

Jane Bright, whose son Evan was killed there in July 2003, was one of those participating last month in a demonstration at the gates of Dover Air Force Base by relatives of soldiers sent to Iraq.

“Let the media and the rest of America see the coffins when they return to US soil,” she said at the rally. “Our children did not live in secrecy, they should not be shrouded in secrecy upon their passing.”

The ban on coverage at Dover is patently political. The White House knows full well that public support for the war in Iraq is dangerously thin. Even where such limited backing exists, it rests largely upon public misconceptions resulting from lies told by the administration and echoed in the mass media about nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and ties between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al Qaeda.

The administration is likewise conscious of what General Henry Shelton referred to as “the Dover test.” Recalling the Vietnam War, the former Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman warned that public support for any prolonged US military intervention would have to be strong enough to withstand the impact of media images of soldiers' coffins being unloaded from military transport planes at the Delaware air base.

With US casualties in Iraq reaching levels unseen since Vietnam—105 killed in the last three weeks alone—there is a concerted effort to evade this “test” by keeping the real human cost of the Iraq war out of the

public eye.

“Look, nobody wants to see dead people on their television screens,” Bush declared at his April 13 press conference. “I don’t like that.... It’s gut wrenching.” Acting on this presidential insight, the Pentagon has done its best to censor such images.

Nor is this effort limited to US casualties. The military has systematically sought to suppress coverage of the horrific toll in Iraqi dead and wounded that has accompanied the US attempt to suppress resistance to the occupation.

During its ongoing siege of Fallujah, the US military command demanded that the crew of the Qatar-based *Al Jazeera* television be removed from the battered city. The network was broadcasting reports on the hundreds of women and children killed there, even as the Pentagon was claiming that 95 percent of the Iraqi fatalities were “military-age males.”

Asked by a reporter what he would say to Iraqis who were seeing the carnage in Fallujah on *Al Jazeera*, the chief US military spokesman General Mark Kimmitt replied, “Change the channel.” The occupation forces have backed up this advice by firing on *Al Jazeera* crews as well as imprisoning and even torturing some of the network’s staff.

The US mass media, with very few exceptions, has acquiesced to the administration’s efforts to conceal the extent of the killing and dying by US forces in Iraq, just as they parroted its lies in the run-up to the war. They have provided scant coverage of US soldiers’ deaths and funerals, not to mention the grief of their families. Likewise, they have shown little inclination to publish or broadcast images of Iraqi civilian casualties.

The war in Iraq is being fought in the interest of the American financial elite, which sees the appropriation of that country’s oil wealth as a source of fresh profits and global power. It is being paid for, however, by American working people, whose children are the ones who are dying and whose living standards will be slashed to pay the ballooning cost of an open-ended military occupation.

None of those coming back from Iraq in flag-draped coffins are known to the Bush family or to the media owners and managers. They are almost all from the working class, most of them under 25 and drawn into the military by the lack of jobs or need for college tuition.

In a rare moment of candor, the president’s mother and former “first lady,” Barbara Bush, summed up the arrogant indifference of the ruling oligarchy to the deaths of these young men and women. Interviewed by ABC’s Diane Sawyer last year on the eve of the US invasion, she declared: “Why should we hear about body bags and deaths and how many,” she said. “It’s not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?”

Nothing could more crudely express the vast social chasm that exists in America.

The attempt to use government secrecy and censorship to conceal the costs of the war in Iraq in terms of lives and resources is indicative of a far-reaching breakdown of democratic processes in the US. It is also symptomatic of a ruling establishment that is profoundly isolated from and in fear of the broad masses of American working people.

The Bush administration and its ostensible political opposition in the Democratic Party agree that the military occupation of Iraq must continue and that the price in human life will continue to be paid. Over this, there will be no debate in the 2004 election, nor any choice for the American voter.

The struggle to bring an end to this illegal war and to bring all US troops home can be conducted only through the building of an independent mass political movement of working people in struggle against the two-party system. It is to prepare such a movement that the Socialist Equality Party is intervening with its own candidates in the elections.



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