

# The Dover mortuary scandal and America's disposable soldiers

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The appalling revelation that the US military hired a private contractor to haul, incinerate and dump the partial remains of US troops killed in Iraq at a county landfill has outraged both the families of those killed in Washington's wars as well as many active duty and retired military personnel.

The dumping of remains sent to Dover Air Force Base, which the Pentagon says ended in 2008, took place under cover of a media blackout imposed by the Pentagon and the George W. Bush White House. Bush justified the press ban by declaring "the sensitivity and privacy of families of the fallen must be the first priority."

Of course, the real reason was the administration's desire not to feed growing anti-war sentiment. As a former military commander explained, a decision to use military force would have to pass "the Dover test"—that is, the public's reaction to seeing flag-draped caskets streaming steadily into the Delaware air base. Just as the Bush White House launched the Iraq war on the basis of lies, it sought to deceive the American people by evading this "test" by means of state censorship.

With its operations shrouded in secrecy, the Dover mortuary introduced the bizarre and callous practice of packing up already cremated remains together with medical waste and sending them to a landfill to be incinerated and scattered among the trash.

Gari-Lynn Smith, the widow of Sgt. 1st Class Scott B. Smith, a member of a bomb-disposal unit killed in 2006, spent four years writing letters, making phone calls and submitting information requests to discover what had been done with remains of her husband identified after his funeral.

Last April she finally received the response that such remains were incinerated and dumped in the King George landfill. This information was followed by a note from the Dover mortuary director reading, "I hope this information brings some comfort to you during your time of loss."

Infuriated, *Washi Smith* told *Post*, the known that they were doing something disgusting and they were doing everything they could to keep it from us."

In a grudging apology, the Air Force's deputy chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Darrell Jones, told a press conference in Washington Thursday that the Pentagon regretted any "additional grief to the families that past practices may have caused."

While claiming that the mission of the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations was to treat the remains of fallen troops with "dignity, honor and respect," he defended packing the remains up with medical waste for incineration and dumping as being "in accordance with industry standards." However, representatives of both the landfill and the firm hired to transport and incinerate the crates marked "medical waste" sent out of Dover were never told their real contents and expressed shock that they had been handling human remains.

The Air Force general cites the "industry standard" for waste hauling. But the standard for dealing with remains of soldiers has been set by the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery.

The Air Force has tried to justify its actions by pointing to the fact that the families of the 274 military personnel involved had signed waivers asking not to be notified if additional remains of their loved ones were identified after their burial. Obviously, for many, nothing could be more hideously painful than to receive periodic calls announcing that another piece of their child, spouse or parent had been found.

But clearly, none of them imagined that these remains were to be disposed of in a landfill. In addition to the 976 body parts and fragments from the 274 soldiers, more than 1,700 other unidentified remains were similarly unceremoniously dumped.

The head of the Air Force, Gen. Norton Schwartz, told

the media that families had been notified about this procedure only last week because the Pentagon was forced to wait until the Office of Special Counsel was ready to issue a report on its probe of the affair.

However, the special counsel, Carolyn Lerner, described Schwartz's explanation as "patently false." She said that her office had urged the Air Force as early as last March to notify the families and repeated this advice. "Their response was that these families, some of them had blogs; they couldn't be trusted—that they might go to the media," she said.

American society and its political culture have been saturated with the glorification of militarism and the incessant deification of the military's "warriors"—a term totally alien to a democratic republic that came into usage only with the never-ending "global war on terror." But the ugly truth of the desecration of human remains at Dover and the military's shameful attempt at a cover-up have exposed the cynicism and brutality that have accompanied a decade of uninterrupted war, together with the callousness towards the troops who have waged them.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were launched on the basis of lies about a supposedly existential threat from terrorism and non-existent weapons of mass destruction. They have been waged in the interests of the financial elite with the aim of securing American hegemony over the strategically vital and energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. In the process, they have vastly enriched a coterie of private contractors, ranging from Halliburton to Blackwater.

As for the troops, they have been regarded as cannon fodder. They are members of a so-called "all volunteer" military that was created in the aftermath of the Vietnam War precisely to insulate the US war machine from democratic influences and popular sentiments against militarism. The aim was to give the government a far freer hand to wage military aggression abroad than would exist if the entire population were subject to military conscription.

The result is that the imperialist wars of the last decade have been waged by a very small portion of the population, with just one half of one percent of American adults on active duty at any given time. This layer, drawn overwhelmingly from working class youth, many of them seeking employment or a means of getting a college education, has been subjected to unprecedented numbers of virtually back-to-back tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq.

These wars have involved terrible crimes against

civilian populations, with estimates of over a million Iraqi lives lost and tens of thousands of civilians killed in Afghanistan. The dirty colonial character of these conflicts has also taken its toll on the troops who wage them. In addition to the more than 6,300 American troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 16 percent of post-9/11 veterans have suffered serious injuries, many of them amputations or head trauma. The invisible wounds of psychological and emotional trauma are even more pervasive.

For those leaving the military, and tens of thousands more will be joining them with the drawdown of troops from Iraq, conditions are increasingly grim. Those returning to civilian life confront the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The unemployment rate for younger veterans, aged 18 to 24, has soared to 30.4 percent, double the rate for this section of the population as a whole.

At least 13,000 young veterans between the ages of 18 and 30 have joined the nation's homeless population, according to a recent study by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Veterans Administration.

Hundreds of thousands of those who were sent to Iraq and Afghanistan have returned with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which together with multiple amputations is perhaps the signature wound of these two dirty colonial wars. Most have to fight to receive treatment, with appointments often delayed by months. In some cases, even soldiers who have attempted suicide are denied timely appointments.

Suicide rates among active duty military personnel have set new records, with 305 members of the Army taking their own lives last year. Among veterans, the figures are even more alarming, with the Veterans Administration estimating that 18 veterans die by their own hands every single day.

The scandal surrounding the handling of remains at Dover is emblematic of what have become disposable soldiers, chewed up and spit out by America's war machine.



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