

Sunshine Week: The Pentagon's media coverage policy – a father's personal perspective

Contributed by Jerry E. Stephens
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Sunshine Week 2009 takes place from March 15 through 21. The annual event is about the public's right to know what its government is doing, and why. Sunshine Week seeks to enlighten and empower people to play an active role in their government at all levels, and to give them access to information that makes their lives better and their communities stronger. Lake County News will present guest commentaries and news stories about open government as part of this year's Sunshine Week.

The Pentagon has for many years had a policy restricting the media coverage of the coffins containing the bodies of returning service members. The policy was, arguably, implemented so as to protect the privacy of our military families. That's a noble consideration. But it may also intentionally or otherwise shield Americans from the true costs of our overseas military involvement.

President Obama has directed a review of the policy. The principal change in policy seems to be some type of family choice whether there is media coverage or not.

But has anything really changed? Ralph Begleiter, a faculty member at the University of Delaware and a former CNN correspondent, has long fought the media ban. He has suggested that "people who die make that sacrifice not solely for the[ir] families but also for the nation."

I agree. Begleiter is speaking for me when he speaks of the sacrifices of our military. And by their families as well.

Begleiter has also written that our public recognition of the return of our dead soldiers "is a matter of national grieving."

I agree. Begleiter is speaking for me when he urges all of us to recognize our military dead as a mature part of our national grieving.

Now let me tell you why I agree with him. In part, it is my long held belief that government actions must be taken transparently. Citizens are expected to participate in government decision making. And real participation requires that we know what government is doing.

But there is more. Just look north to Canada and Route 401 known in Ontario as the "Highway of Heroes." There's so much that we can learn from Canadians about a collective national grieving for a nation's personal losses and sacrifice.

My son is on his way to Afghanistan. Right now, he is at Ft. Riley, Kan., attending to counterinsurgency training. That's the type of work he will be expected to do in Afghanistan as he trains soldiers in the Afghan National Army. It is the type of training work my son has done for several years at a National Guard training academy.

My son is the type of soldier we would all be proud of. He is honorable, conscientious, ethical and forthright. He is both a loveable character and a man with well-developed values. He could be a poster child for many. But he is his family's hero.

My son is also very different from me in many ways. He is conservative, committed to the military, a voter and supporter of George W. Bush's presidency, and probably more genuinely spiritual. I am socially liberal, an internationalist at heart, and remain unconvinced that any of our wars fought since 1945 have been fully justifiable. Many of these military actions seem, at best, some part of an imperial ambition that is not worthy of our democracy.

Even as we are different in so many ways, I remain comfortable with the decisions my son has made. He is, after all, an adult fully capable of choosing what path he takes in life.

My son has now resigned from the Guard and has transferred to the regular Army. All that so he can take part in this training assignment in Afghanistan. In part, my son believes that every soldier must serve overseas at some time. He also honestly believes he has something to contribute to rebuilding Afghanistan.

This one, however, seems to be an assignment fraught with some real risks. But I know that my son will take all his character and his mature skills to Afghanistan. It is the wonderful adult that he is that will probably guarantee that he succeeds in this work with his Afghani colleagues. They will, in turn, be the ones to protect my son.

I am so proud of this strong, confident, and honorable man. Yet I worry about him being overseas. I do so want him to return safely from Afghanistan.

But there is one other thing that I believe. If my son were to die in Afghanistan, I would not want a Pentagon policy hiding his return. I would want every American to know that my son is returning from Afghanistan. After all, he would be returning just the way he went there. He went as a proud and honorable soldier serving his nation. He would deserve nothing less than an honorable recognition by this nation of his contributions. I would want everyone to know that my son had returned from Afghanistan.

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