

Images of War Dead



TAMI SILICIO

Flag-draped coffins are shown inside a cargo plane April 7 at Kuwait International Airport, in a photograph published Sunday. The photographer said she hoped the image would help families understand the care with which fallen soldiers are returned home.

Images of war dead a sensitive subject

Full

story:

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2001909526_coffinside22m.html

By Ray Rivera

Seattle Times staff reporter

The image was of row upon row of flag-draped coffins being loaded onto an Air Force cargo plane in Kuwait.

They were American war dead, killed in a bloody month of fighting in Iraq. David Perlmutter, a professor at Louisiana State University, showed it to his class and asked:

Would you have published it, as The Seattle Times did on Sunday?

Of the hundred or so in the class, most said no. But when asked to explain, Perlmutter said, they said that while “they didn’t want to see the pictures, they said it’s probably good we know that it’s happening.”

Americans have long struggled with the morality of showing images of war dead, especially fellow Americans.

Tami Silicio, a civilian contract worker, was fired yesterday for taking the picture of coffins being loaded in Kuwait and allowing The Times to publish it.

The Pentagon has banned the media from taking pictures of military caskets returning from war since 1991, citing concern for the privacy of grieving families and friends of the dead soldiers. The Bush administration issued a stern reminder of that policy in March 2003, shortly before the war in Iraq began.

Critics complain that the prohibition is an attempt by the administration to diminish the impact of the loss of American lives.

But whether the ban is a political tactic or is out of sincere concern for the families, the issue is more complex, said Perlmutter, the author of two books on war photography and a professor of mass communication.

“The image of dead Americans, especially the dead American soldier, is probably the most powerful image of war for Americans,” he said. “It’s the one that immediately strikes us in the gut, because we hate to see it but we recognize we may need to see it.”

The poet Oliver Wendell Holmes captured this ambivalence in 1863 after viewing some of the first images of

battlefield casualties being buried during the Civil War.

“Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations,” he wrote. Once they did, he said, “Many, having seen it and dreamed of its horrors, would lock it up in some secret drawer ... as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented.”

Military censors instituted a virtual blackout of such photos in World War I. That ban continued until nearly the end of World War II.

“The assumption was the public didn’t want to see it, and that it would undermine the war effort,” Perlmutter said. “The Normandy invasion was a success, but how would we have felt at the time if we had seen the pictures of all these dead American soldiers on the beaches?”

Images of war dead proliferated in Vietnam, and throughout the 1980s, the government regularly allowed the media to take pictures of coffins returning from Lebanon, Grenada and Panama to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, the primary arrival point for returning American soldiers killed overseas.

But in 1991, as the United States embarked on its first major war since Vietnam, the policy shifted. In January of that year, the administration of the first President Bush began prohibiting media outlets from taking pictures of coffins being unloaded at Dover. It instituted a total ban in November of that year.

“There was an attempt to not have another Vietnam in the sense that the administration was not going to allow the media to sell the war, one way or the other,” said John Louis Lucaites, a communications and culture professor at Indiana University who teaches a class called “Visualizing

War.”

In 1996, the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C., upheld the ban after media outlets and some other organizations sued to have it lifted. Citing the need to reduce the hardship and protect the privacy of grieving families, the court held that the ban did not violate First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and of the press.

The National Military Family Association, one of the largest military-advocacy groups, supports the policy. “The families that we’ve heard from are more interested in their privacy and would hope that people would be sensitive to them in their time of loss,” said Kathy Moakler, deputy director of government relations for the organization.

Moakler, who has two children in the military, said The Times was right to tell Silicio’s story and to describe the respectful process by which the dead are transported home.

But the photograph, she said, was an invasion of privacy for families who might be wondering if their dead loved one was in that array of coffins.

But even among military families, such feelings are not universal.

Marianne Brown, the stepmother of an Army reservist serving in Baghdad, said Silicio’s photograph was long overdue. The Michigan resident belongs to a group of military families who support the publication of photographs of coffins.

“We have to show that, because that’s what we’re paying for” in Iraq, said Brown, a 52-year-old artist living in South Haven,

Mich. "Let's show the truth — the death of our kids. Otherwise it's just statistics."

Veteran Bill Egan of Flagler Beach, Fla., praised Silicio's photo. He was a military photographer aboard the USS Missouri in

the 1980s as it escorted oil tankers through the Persian Gulf.

"I see nothing wrong with showing coffins, especially flag-draped coffins, because it's a reminder of what these people have given up," said Egan, 63.

Lucaites of Indiana University said the image had a powerful, mechanistic quality. "It almost makes it appear as if these coffins are on a conveyer belt, going off into infinity."

And if you're the current administration, he said, "this is not an image you want visualized."

Staff reporter Jonathan Martin contributed to this report. Ray Rivera: 206-464-2926 or rayrivera@seattletimes.com



United States Air Force

Photos of War Dead Released

A Web site that opposed the Pentagon's ban

on images of dead soldiers' homecomings at military bases released hundreds of photographs of coffins.

[Go to New York Times Article](#)

'Seattle Times' Regrets Silicio's Firing, Doesn't Regret Coffin Photo

By Charles Geraci

Published: April 22, 2004 (EditorandPublisher.com)

NEW YORK The firing of military contractor Tami Silicio, whose photograph of flag-draped coffins of American soldiers killed in Iraq was published Sunday by The Seattle Times, was met with negative reaction from the newspaper. Still, the Times stands by its decision to run the controversial image – and claims that Silicio knew the risks.

"I'm happy the picture is out, but it broke my heart when I find out she lost her job," said Barry Fitzsimmons, the paper's photo editor.

"The Times is very sad that Tami [was fired]."

Fitzsimmons was the first at the paper to view the picture, which was sent to him by Silicio's friend Amy Katz.

"I knew immediately that it was something spectacular, but at the same time, I had great concern for Tami," Fitzsimmons said.

"She was fearful of losing her job but she felt she would come out OK."

In several e-mails and telephone conversations, Fitzsimmons told Silicio that publishing the photograph – which depicts more

than 20 coffins of fallen U.S. soldiers loaded on a cargo plane at Kuwait International Airport – could bring repercussions.

But Silicio insisted that the Times run the photo to show the tremendous respect given to the soldiers' remains as they were loaded onto the plane for the trip home.

Despite Silicio's firing, the Times doesn't regret publishing the picture. "It is certainly unfortunate that she got fired but she was fully aware of that possibility beforehand," Managing Editor David Boardman told E&P.

Katz is not sorry, either. "I absolutely have no regrets," she said. "The support I've received from the media and the public has been overwhelming."

Maytag Aircraft, the contractor that employed Silicio, fired her and her husband, David Landry, on Wednesday. The company cited a violation of government and company regulations in its decision.

Katz asserted that "Tami's husband had nothing to do with this. In fact, he was pessimistic about the photo being published," she said.

"I think this is horrible and I feel terrible for her and what she's going through," Katz said. But she added, "I also feel elated. Hundreds of people have said this was the right thing to do."

A former employee of Halliburton, Katz served as a contractor in Kosovo. "On a certain level, I understand the firing," she said.

"I know firsthand the kind of pressure the Department of Defense puts on the contractors."

Kelly McBride, a member of the ethics faculty at the Poynter Institute, said, "This photo serves a journalistic purpose in

causing

the public to question the occupation of Iraq. The harm this photo causes is not to the families of those killed in Iraq but to the administration.”

The Bush administration has claimed that the Pentagon ban on coffin photos defers to the sensitivity of the soldiers’ families.

McBride questions the harm done to families in this instance. “It’s impossible to identify who is in those coffins from the information in the photograph,” McBride said.

She believes the Times acted ethically in its handling of the photo and of Silicio. “Whenever a person is risking substantial harm to be a source, the paper has a responsibility to ensure that person is fully informed of the risks,” McBride said. “Since The Seattle Times did this, they acted well within the bounds of ethical decision-making.”

Silicio and her husband will be returning to the United States in a little over a week. There will be a press conference shortly after their arrival.

Site’s persistence paid off

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

April 24, 2004

DOVER, Del. – Photographs of American war dead arriving at the nation’s largest military mortuary first appeared on a Web

site,
www.thememoryhole.org.

The photographs from Dover Air Force Base, home to the mortuary, were released last week to First Amendment activist Russ Kick, who had filed a Freedom of Information Act request to receive the images.

Air Force officials initially denied the request but decided to release the photos after Kick appealed their decision.

After Kick posted more than 350 photographs on his Web site, the Defense Department barred further release of the photographs to media outlets.

According to his Web site, Kick, who has not returned phone calls or e-mails from The Associated Press, requested all Dover photos from Feb. 1, 2003, to the present.

“He wasn’t distinguishing between what he wanted,” said Col. Jon Anderson, a spokesman for the Dover base. “He just wanted everything.”
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Coffins arrive at Dover Air Force Base. An Air Force command recently released a group of such photos; the Pentagon said the release was a mistake.

Bush Says Privacy Must Be Respected

By RANDALL CHASE, AP

DOVER, Del. (April 23) – President Bush considers the release of photographs of flag-draped military coffins a reminder of the fallen troops’ sacrifice, but believes family privacy should be respected, the White House said Friday.

Pentagon officials said the photos, issued last week and

posted on an Internet site, should not have been made public under a policy prohibiting media coverage of human remains. Some activists argue that the photos, released last week, underscore the war's human cost.

<http://www.latimes.com/features/lifestyle/la-et-smith26apr26,1,6226203.story?coll=la-home-style>

'Coffins' and now chaos

Unlikely provocateur Russ Kick ignites controversy with photos of U.S. military dead.

By Lynn Smith
Times Staff Writer

April 26, 2004

TUCSON – Until Wednesday, Russ Kick had to live with rejection. The author of quirky books like “50 Things You’re Not

Supposed to Know” and proprietor of the Memory Hole website said government agencies have rejected many, if not most, of his 200 Freedom of Information Act requests over the years.

But when he finally won an appeal, it was big – prompting massive media coverage and setting off a debate on the use of emotionally charged images in wartime.

It began when Kick opened his mail last week and found a letter from the U.S. Air Force granting his request for all photographs

taken after February 2003 of caskets containing the remains of U.S. military personnel at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware.

Included was a CD-ROM of 361 photos not just of flag-draped coffins, but also of uniformed pallbearers or fellow soldiers in camouflage bowing their heads, caring for the remains of fallen comrades.

That night, Kick uploaded the photos on his website with the title "Photos of Military Coffins (Casualties From Iraq) at Dover Air Force Base" and went to bed.

Thursday morning, Kick awoke to an explosion of ringing phones. A new media player had been born.

The photos had appeared in the nation's major newspapers and were on heavy rotation on CNN. Heavy Internet traffic had overwhelmed and disabled his website. (Kick said there were 4.2 million hits on www.thememoryhole.org on Friday and nearly 5 million on Saturday.)

"CBS had called and wanted to send a camera out to interview me for the evening news with Dan Rather. While the camera crew was setting up, ABC called saying, 'We want to fly you out to New York for "Good Morning America" tomorrow morning, so you have to leave in a couple of hours.' While that was going on, more calls were coming in."

Forty-eight hours later, Kick looked dazed back home in Tucson, in the dim ground-floor apartment he shares with "permanent fiancée" Anne Brooks, a crisis counselor, and two loyal rescue cats. Boxes of unpacked files covered the floor.

An unlikely provocateur, Kick, 34, is friendly, somber and slow-spoken, with shoulder-length hair and substantial spectacles. He usually spends his waking hours reading newspapers and websites, scouting for potential FOIA request subjects. Brooks calls him an "absent-minded professor" who can tell you every detail about suppressed FBI reports but can't find the electric bill. She serves as his agent and publicist because if left to himself, he would stay home in front of his computer 24 hours a day, she said. "He could spend a whole week in the house," she said.

Kick's unlikely success marks the rise of a new and significant third player in the news game, said Jay Rosen, chairman of the journalism department at New York University. "Before, you had two players: the government/military who could control photos and access to the base, and the press, which is trying to get pictures and access. Now, you have a third interest you could call the Web. It's not just another medium and way to distribute stuff and reach people. But other actors come into play who might have some of the same goals as the press, but aren't the press."

Robert S. Lichter, co-director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, said of Kick: "He pried loose information that probably nobody else could. He was probably too naïve to know that he would get turned down, so he got through. A Washington correspondent for a major newspaper would know it would be a waste of time."

Kick is against the war, and realizes his publishing of the photos could be taken as a political act. However, he said he was more motivated by his passion to bring to light hidden images.

Photographs of returning war dead have been a sensitive issue since Vietnam, when, it is widely believed, they helped turn public opinion against the war.

Matthew Felling, media director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, believes the timing of the photos, in conjunction with the death of former NFL football star Pat Tillman in Afghanistan last week, could mark a shift in public opinion about the war.

Others, including his colleague Lichter, aren't so sure. "Politicians don't give people enough credit," Lichter said. "They're afraid that the emotions of a picture will scare people out of their reasoned opinions. Usually, it isn't so."

While Kick has run into strangers calling him a hero, not everyone was happy. The Pentagon called the release a mistake and renewed its ban on releasing such images to the media, saying they violate the privacy of troops' families. Then NASA protested that several dozen of the images were actually Space Shuttle Columbia victims, not Iraqi war dead after all.

That mistake placed Kick in the middle of one of the stickiest problems associated with e-media – the potential for the virus-like spread of misinformation.

At one point while he was trying to obtain the photos, Kick said, he had an e-mail exchange with the Air Force's Air Mobility Command asking if he also wanted photos of the astronauts' caskets. "I said don't worry about the astronauts. Just the soldiers killed overseas."

In its cover letter, he said, the Air Force didn't mention anything about the astronauts, or if any of the caskets came from Afghanistan. "There was

no context. When the CD showed up, I was so overwhelmed and surprised, I didn't even think about the first 73 that are actually the astronauts," he said.

"I wish I had realized that at first."

He offered on his site to send high-resolution versions of the photos to news agencies wanting to reproduce them. He said he gave photos only to CBS and Newsweek.

"The rest just pulled them off the Web and ran those," he said.

A number of media organizations have run corrections or clarifications. Kick is also sensitive about his credibility, and by Sunday had posted an update on the site stating 73 of the photos were of the Columbia astronauts and the remaining 288 were of the war dead.

"The overall thrust of it is still correct," he said. "These are photographs of military caskets coming into Dover. You were not allowed to see them by orders of the Pentagon. And now here they are."

Kick said he is motivated by a passionate and eclectic interest in archiving endangered information that goes far beyond the political to lost languages, mistreated whales or finalists' designs for the new \$20 bill. "I do get angry when it's obvious somebody is lying to us, or keeping something from us. I take it personally," he said.

A psychology major at Tennessee Tech, Kick started out with small unnoticed books like "Psychotropedia: A Guide to Publications on the Periphery" and "Hot Off the Net: Erotica and Other Sex Writings From the Internet." But now he earns a living as the

bestselling author for the slick and independent Disinformation Company, writing small novelty books and editing oversized anthologies of counterculture pieces by better-known authors, such as "You Are Being Lied To: The Disinformation Guide to Media Distortion, Historical Whitewashes and Cultural Myths."

In 2002, he started his "labor of love," a moderately successful noncommercial website called the Memory Hole after an incinerator in George Orwell's "1984" that destroys information the government finds embarrassing. He gets donations and sometimes hard-to-get reports from visitors to his website.

Last October, the New York Times wrote a Page One story about his success in restoring blacked-out portions of a Justice Department report (he used Adobe Acrobat) on its failures in diversity hiring. The report was downloaded from the Memory Hole 340,000 times.

Kick said he decided to ask for the casket photos last fall after he read a Washington Post story that the Pentagon had clamped down on a military-wide policy not to allow media coverage of deceased military personnel returning to the base at Dover, the largest mortuary operated by the Department of Defense. Kick read something into the story that others apparently did not see.

"I was pretty sure because of that directive that said 'don't show them,' well, there must be pictures to show.... I thought, 'What have I got to lose?' A stamp. I've made many requests before that didn't go anywhere, so I'll just send these in and see what happens."

U.S. Military Affirms TV Cover Ban on Iraq Coffins

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| Mon Apr 26, 11:52 AM ET | |
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By Erik Kirschbaum

BERLIN (Reuters) – A ban on media access to coffins of killed American soldiers as they are transferred to U.S.-bound aircraft at an airbase in Germany will stay in place despite calls to relax the rules, officials said Monday.

U.S. military officials at Ramstein, a major air base used as a transfer point, said the Department of Defense re-affirmed a ban on television crews and photographers from filming flag-draped coffins, although coverage of the wounded is permitted.

The issue erupted when photographs of coffins appeared in the media after the Air Force released more than 300 pictures in response to a Freedom of Information request. More than 700 U.S. troops have died in Iraq, including more than 100 this month.

Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry accused President Bush Sunday of trying to hide the consequences of the war by restricting coffin pictures. But the White House said it protects the privacy of soldiers' families.

"The policy was re-affirmed at the weekend and it says we don't allow it (pictures of coffins) so we don't," said Major Mike Young, public affairs chief for the 435th air base wing in Ramstein, about half-way between Iraq and the Dover air base.

"There has been heightened media interest and we do get requests," he said. "The policy states we do it out of respect to the families."

There have been some instances where we did (allow access), but we're not going to do it again."

The ban was set up in 1991 but later relaxed, officials said. They dismiss criticism it represents censorship.

Camera crews did film honor guard ceremonies and transfers of American-flag covered coffins onto planes headed for Dover after the attack

on the U.S.S. Cole in 2000 and also during the war in Afghanistan Young and other U.S. officials said.

But rules were again strictly enforced just before the Iraq war began. Young said all 700 Americans killed in Iraq had passed through Ramstein, but no coffins had been filmed.

Journalists in Germany trying to obtain access to the flag-draped coffins said they'd been repeatedly told "No."

"They should let us cover coffins the same way they let us cover injured soldiers coming through," said Christel Kucharz, a field producer for

ABC news based in Germany. "If nothing else, to pay respects and bring it home to viewers in the states."