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What Do You Do with Dead Soldiers?

By Michael Sledge

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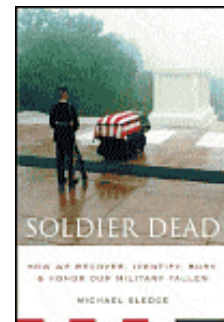
“What do you do with dead soldiers?”

This is the question asked by Charlie Anderson (played by Jimmy Stewart) in the 1965 movie, *Shenandoah*, when he and his sons come upon the bodies of Confederate soldiers who were ambushed.

Now, with the death toll of Operation Iraqi Freedom continuing to mount—but still less than three or four days’ worth of dying in World War II or a couple of tough weeks in Vietnam—we once again find ourselves, as John Fogerty says in his protest song, “Déjà vu All Over Again,” “Ship[ping] the bodies home while the networks all keep score.”

What do we do with the dead?

When researching and writing *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen*, a book inspired by a story I heard about the recovery of missing Korean War dead, I asked that question again and again—and, surprisingly, came up with another question, even more important: “*Who* are the dead?”



Stewart’s character was not referring only to the Confederate dead strewn on the road in front of him. Clearly, his comment included the waste from *all* those killed in war. Wilson “Woody” Powell, Executive Director of Veterans for Peace, in an interview on *Democracy Now*, made the same observation: “The first objective of Veterans for Peace is to inform the people of the cost of war. Of course, the most apparent one is the immediate deaths of the combatants.” Powell did not exclude enemy dead when he said “combatants.”

Similarly, Marla Ruzicka, the activist who was recently killed in Baghdad, understood the importance of counting all the dead. Her efforts to “try to do the right humanitarian thing” often ran into roadblocks, but she nevertheless persevered, right up until her death, to help Iraqis document the death of family members at the hands of U.S. forces.

With regard to our dead, the U.S. government has a very caring and complicated process that has evolved over the last 300 years to the point where almost all remains are immediately recovered, identified, and returned. One aspect, though, is controversial: the media ban on any depiction of returning transfer cases containing remains—that is, the avoidance of “The Dover Test.” (General Hugh Shelton, Retired, first used the phrase at Harvard on January 19, 2000, when he said that a decision to commit the nations troops into combat “[M]ust be subjected to what I call ‘The Dover Test.’ Is the American public prepared for the sight of our most precious resource coming home in flag-draped caskets...?”)

The administration justifies its prohibition as an effort to protect the privacy of the bereaved families. (“The families can invite or allow all the journalists they wish at private burial ceremonies,” is a rationale I have frequently encountered.) But media representatives and pundits say that the return of our “Soldier Dead” is a matter that belongs in the public domain. To my knowledge, no one has been able to refer to surveys of family members or find legal citations that would support either position.

But The Dover Test is not the most important issue. As I talked to current and former service members responsible for the actual hands-on work of handling remains, family members of the fallen, and others who are in some way charged with the duty to care for the dead, it became clear to me that we are searching for a way to adequately commemorate those who give their lives for their country.

As we approach the start of the fourth year of the Iraq War this Spring, we will have speeches, services, and silences, all meant to recognize our losses. But we are still not addressing the fundamental issue—that, perhaps more than we know, we grieve for those we kill. This cannot help but be true if part of the mission to spread democracy is to establish the equal freedom and value of all individuals of all nations. This cannot help but be true if, despite the moral compromises we might have to make in order to wage war, we still feel some empathy for our foes as fellow human beings who have also sacrificed their lives.

Throughout its history, the United States has focused on its own dead while failing to acknowledge the masses who have died at our hands. The number of Iraqi dead from the first Gulf War is unknown, but is thought to top 100,000.

The number of dead in the current Iraq War, too, is unknown, but some estimates exceed even that number. What do we do with those dead? And, while we struggle to find a way to commemorate the deaths of *our* servicemen and -women, are we at all aware, as Stewart's character was, of the need to recognize the value of *all* lives lost?

During my research, it was difficult to obtain information about American dead, but even more difficult to find out about enemy dead. In the current Iraq War, we do know that combatant dead in Fallujah lay in the streets for days before recovery. We do know that Iraqi dead have been handled in a way that would have brought immediate protests had our dead been handled in a like manner.

Certainly, the United States leads the world in the humane treatment of enemy dead, but there is still much to be done. Consider, for example, the words of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld when speaking to reporters about the decision to publicly display the bodies of Uday and Qusay Hussein: "I'm glad I made it. . . . In this case, it was not a close call for me." He might as well have attached thongs through their Achilles tendons and dragged them around the cities of Fallujah, Tikrit, or Baghdad.

The United States, in its endeavor to spread its principles of freedom and democracy around the world, must view all loss of life as regrettable and, when it happens, allocate resources (if we care to, we will) to ensure that the bodies of enemy dead receive swift and humane treatment. If we do not, then those enemy dead will return to haunt and oppose us in a manner that will cause even more American lives to be lost.

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