



## Scoring political points with flags and coffins

Christopher McCreery: 'More than 130 Canadian peacekeepers have given their lives since 1948. The flag was not half-masted for any of them'

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But what do the families want? That was the question that not a few of us were asking this week, right around the time that the military flags and funerals controversies were starting to take shape. Why doesn't somebody ask the military families what they want?

Whether or not one favours lowering flags to half-mast whenever a member of the Canadian Forces falls in the field of combat -- and whether or not one believes the media should be permitted to be present to witness the repatriation of a soldier's remains -- on one point, we could (hopefully) all agree: The flags-and-funerals firestorm was profoundly, irredeemably insensitive, and it demeaned virtually everyone involved. Except the families, that is, now burdened with a grief that is beyond measurement.

The storm seemed to come out of the blue, but that did not deter the usual suspects. In no time at all, an ugly brawl was underway, involving the federal government, Members of Parliament, provincial governments, one big-city mayor and the media, all appearing eager to score a few grubby debating points about the position of the flag, or the position of a video camera. Unaware or uncaring that their debate contest was taking place, quite literally, in the middle of four funeral processions.

The contestants made certain that their main points got a thorough airing in the mainstream media, naturally. They're good at that. Late last week, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor told a news conference that flags would no longer be lowered over Parliament, or other federal buildings, when a soldier perishes in the line of duty. Said O'Connor: "We have returned to the 80-year tradition of remembering all casualties of war or operations on one day -- November 11."

Opposition politicians and some editorialists loudly decried the move, and the lack of consultation that attended it. Alberta Premier Ralph Klein declared that the provincial legislature would continue to fly flags at half-mast to honour Canada's war dead. So did the Speaker of Ontario's Legislature, and even Toronto's mayor.

Then, this week, the Defence Minister informed the Defence Department -- as well as Gen. Rick Hillier, the chief of the defence staff -- that media organizations

would heretofore be barred from ceremonies marking the return of the fallen.

The Liberal defence critic called the move "absolutely un-Canadian." The Ottawa Citizen said it "[evoked] parallels with the Bush administration's controversial policy of barring photographs of the coffins of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq." A headline on the CBC's Web site declared: "Harper on defensive over media ban on return of dead soldiers." For some of us, it stirred faint suspicions that O'Connor's decision -- whether meritorious or not -- would now be used by the Parliamentary Press Gallery to exact petty revenge on a government it increasingly regards as unhelpful and unfriendly.

In the midst of all of this conduct unbecoming, I received an e-mail from a member of the Canadian Forces, responding to something I wrote on my Web site. He is stationed out West, and I correspond with him regularly. He is a good man. This is what he wrote, without a word changed:

Dear Warren,

Somebody killed my friend this weekend. Corporal Randy Payne served at the same base as me. He was a military policeman. He leaves behind a wife and two wonderful kids, aged seven and five. Randy was a fine soldier, a friendly man, and a proud and loving father and husband. I'll miss him. My wife and I are thinking constantly of his wife and kids. My wife spoke with his wife today, and Mrs. Payne and her kids are flying to Ontario tomorrow for the horrendous tasks of meeting Randy's casket, grieving with family members, and saying goodbye to Randy.

You know, the people who killed Randy are the same people who fire rockets at school playgrounds and shoot teachers in front of their pupils. They're the same people who beat women for nothing more than revealing their faces in public. It is right to fight these fanatics and I'm proud that Canada is doing its part. That doesn't change the fact that my friend is dead and his family is now dealing with unbearable grief, but it at least gives a partial answer to the question "why?" God bless Canada.

That letter, to me, says it better than I could ever hope to. After a week like Canada has just had, a lot of us do not give a damn -- a sweet damn -- what the politicians, or the media, think about the relative merits of the position of our flag on a pole, or the position of a few cameras at a military funeral. We don't care.

Corporal Matthew Dinning; Bombardier Myles Mansell; Lieutenant William Turner; Corporal Randy Payne. That's what I, we, care about.

And what their families want? That's what I want, too.

Warren Kinsella blogs for the Post and at [www.warrenkinsella.com](http://www.warrenkinsella.com).

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