

# Civilization Watch

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## Honoring Those Who Died

I was on my way home from speaking to officers at an air base, so when, during a brief layover, I saw a young man in uniform waiting for the same flight as me, I thought nothing of it -- I was used to uniforms.

It happened that during boarding, we were nearly alone at the back of the plane for a few minutes. We struck up a conversation.

This young man was nearing the end of his time in military service. An Army Ranger, he had been deployed three times to Afghanistan. During his last mission, he had parachuted into hostile territory and, as he said it, "My chute must have been packed on a Monday, because it didn't fully open."

He broke his back -- a savage injury -- and after three operations he was able to walk and sit, but his military service was over. He was looking forward to going home to Hawaii, where he intended to take his disability payment and open a small restaurant, oceanside, "half a dozen tables, serving good drinks and Mediterranean cuisine," he said.

Meanwhile, though, he was serving out the end of his term of service by escorting home the servicemen who, as he said, "didn't make it."

I realized then that the airplane I was flying in held, in its cargo space, the body of a young man who had died in the service of America -- in my service. His family was waiting to meet the airplane and say good-bye to their beloved son and brother.

When we reached our destination, most of us made our way down to the baggage area, but no bags appeared on the conveyor. A voice over the loudspeaker announced that while the family was receiving the coffin at planeside, no bags would be unloaded.

Nobody complained. Nobody even showed impatience. We were all tired and eager to get home or to a hotel, but we could wait for the family whose son would never come home.

As I waited, though, I reflected on other things the escorting soldier had told me.

The family was actually from another city, one with a much larger airport than this one. But they had opted to drive the extra miles to receive the coffin here ... so they could avoid the demonstrators who had lately been showing up.

Demonstrators? Yes, we've heard of those right-wing "Christians" who have used military funerals as an opportunity to spew hatred toward homosexuals. But this young soldier had never run into that particular group.

Instead, his experiences were with demonstrators of an older, more familiar variety. "Hippie college students," he called one such group. "They egged the hearse."

On that occasion, the brother of the dead soldier was so hurt and angry at these strangers who dared to defile his brother's memory and worsen his family's suffering that "he clocked one of them."

So the brother was arrested for assault and could not be with his family for the rest of the services in honor of one of America's fallen.

The demonstrators suffered no penalty. In fact, they received extra credit from a college professor because they had "taken part in a demonstration."

His stories hurt me even to hear them. We may live in a country that tries to pretend that nothing is sacred, but in fact some things are. The grief of a family that has lost a beloved family member is surely such a thing. There is an aura of holiness, no matter what your beliefs might be. Even if you believe in no afterlife, there is still *this* life; there is still the decency we owe to fellow human beings who are suffering a loss that cannot be amended.

And when the loss is as a sacrifice in a war, then even if you detest the war itself, even if you despise the kind of people who volunteer for military service, even if, in your twisted moral worldview, you think that volunteer soldiers somehow "deserve" what befalls them; even if you sneer at the faith of all who believe in the hope of an afterlife, our Constitution surely gives you no right to afflict their families in their time of public grief.

Some would say that, painful as it is, it's the price of democracy.

I don't think so. We make many exceptions to the free-speech rule. Weak as they are, we still have libel and slander laws, for instance. More relevant to this case, however, our Supreme Court has upheld an obvious violation of the right to free speech and free public assembly, by allowing laws to remain in effect that ban any kind of demonstration close to an abortion clinic. You can't even kneel and pray silently on the sidewalk outside the clinic.

If the right to kill your fetus is so sacred that you cannot be allowed to see or hear anyone who would like to discourage you from doing such a thing, regardless of the Constitution, then is it unreasonable to protect the families whose children died in war from having to see or hear demonstrators against the cause for which their children were sacrificed?

I hear much talk of a Constitutional amendment to protect the flag from being burned or publicly defiled.

I've never been able to get very enthusiastic about such a law. I always figure that people who would defile the symbol of our nation are saying such vile things about themselves that it is a self-punishing offense.

In the end, what have they done? Burned a piece of cloth, and demonstrated their own worthlessness as citizens of the greatest nation ever to exist on this earth. (Fortunately, a nation doesn't have to be perfect to be the best so far.)

Our servicemen voted with their years of service, the risks they bore, and, in too many cases, their maiming or crippling or loss of life. They spoke by making that choice -- in favor of defending and protecting their nation.

During their years of service they obeyed the orders they were given by the people constitutionally elected or selected to rule our country and its armed forces. From their uniform, you can't tell whether they approved or disapproved of a particular war.

In fact, the young man who was escorting the body told me quite candidly, "I'm against the war." But he still did his duty. He served honorably.

Demonstrators at servicemen's funerals are hecklers, trying to shout down the message of the serviceman's life. They are not exercising freedom of speech, they are denying it -- and denying it to a person who is utterly helpless to speak ever again, because he is dead.

This one message is the last he can deliver: That he loved his country, his family, his friends, his fellowcitizens, his duty, his honor -- so much that he put himself in harm's way in order to protect them as the government said they should be protected.

That message is one that the survival of our nation and our way of life -- including the freedom to demonstrate for causes noble or stupid -- depends on. A nation that allows *that* message to be silenced in the name of "freedom" is signing its own death warrant.

Here is what I propose. Forget the constitutional amendment about flags. Let's demand that Congress pass a law banning any kind of political demonstration within the sight or hearing of people in attendance at the funerals, viewings, or burials of men and women who died in uniform, and forbidding demonstrating at or defacing their grave.

Patriotic display would be exempted, of course -- because the rituals of leavetaking should include the right of family and friends to speak in favor of what the soldier sacrificed for.

Anyone who breaks this law by holding up signs or shouting slogans or throwing things at such a funeral would receive a felony conviction, including the loss of their right to vote, and a mandatory sentence of exactly one year.

The soldier whose funeral they vandalized has lost all the rest of the years of his life. His family cannot count down the days until he returns to them; he isn't coming back.

So one year of prison for those who tried to shout down and defile the message of that soldier's life is not excessive. One year of not attending the classes of agents provocateurs hiding behind tenure will not hurt them; many years of being forbidden to vote is not at all inappropriate.

Have your freedom of speech; say whatever you like. But treat the families of our sacrificed servicemen with ordinary human decency. That's what such a law would say.

And if they believe in their cause so much that they are willing to go ahead and break it, then that's fine. Just remember that the essence of civil disobedience is that you *accept the lawful punishment* for your crime. Egg the hearse, if you must -- but then do your time in jail. Whatever you might think of the choices of the dead soldier, he accepted the consequences of his choices, and so must his family; have the spine to do the same with *your* choices.

Every city, every state in this nation should act now, not waiting for a pusillanimous Congress. Pass laws, not to keep demonstrators back a set number of feet, but to keep them from sight or hearing of those attending the funeral of anyone who died in uniform. Let the policemen on the scene determine how far is "out of sight," and how quiet is "out of hearing."

What I care about is this: If anyone wishes to offend decency by attacking a family already grieving just to make their own petty little opinion heard, the police have the authority to arrest them and silence them immediately. Their message can be heard anywhere else -- but decency and national honor owe the families of the dead those few days of respectful treatment.

Meanwhile, I know of a young soldier with a damaged back, who will suffer a life of pain and limitations; he, too, has sacrificed for his country. And even if we only see him at his little restaurant on the north shore of Oahu, we can salute him and all his brothers and sisters in uniform who ever served to protect our freedom and prosperity.

Whatever we might think about the wisdom of the choices of our political leaders, the soldiers themselves who carry out those choices should be immune to hostility when they return to our shores.

They have earned a safe haven and a quiet resting place here.