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Counting, Valuing, and Grieving Differently: The Global War on Terror's American Toll

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Abstract

In March 2003 (the eve of Iraq's invasion) the George W. Bush Administration re-issued, extended, and enforced a Directive prohibiting the publication and broadcast of images and videos capturing the ritual repatriation of America's war dead. This Directive (known as the Dover Ban) is exemplary of a wider set of more subtle processes and practices of American statecraft working to move suffering and dead American soldiers out of the American public eye's sight. This is due, I argue, to dominant (Government and Military) bodies knowing, valuing, and counting generic soldier material as but a "precious resource" with which to fuel the GWoT. However, my investigation into the (in)visibility of suffering and dead American soldiers since 9/11 reveals that subordinate yet challenging American bodies could not be stopped from knowing, valuing, and counting American soldiers differently—in life, injury, and death. Indeed, regarding American soldiers as grievable persons, the challenging actions discussed in this article demonstrate how Americans were moved to demand and take

the right to count and account for soldiers' suffering and deaths in public and the very face of dominant bodies that "don't do body counts".

Keywords

soldiers, militarism, bodies, visibility, grief

Introduction

Everybody has values. However, different bodies value different bodies differently. Bodies that count—dearly to some bodies—will therefore go uncounted by others. In this article, I explore the politics of value and counting with regard to the (in)visibility of suffering and dead American Soldiers since 9/11. As the following pages detail, I find discrepancies between dominant and challenging American bodies over the counting and value of American soldiers injured and Killed in Action (KIA) engendering intense and continuous contest throughout the Global War on Terror (GWOt). As a microcosmic site explicating what is at stake in this ongoing contest, my exploration begins with the Dover Ban.

The Dover ceremony is a time-honoured American ritual performed at the Air Force Base (AFB) in Dover, Delaware. Traditionally captured in photographs, featured in

newspapers, and broadcast nationally on the network news, during the Dover ceremony the dead bodies of soldiers KIA are returned to American soil. In March 2003 however, on the eve of Iraq's invasion, the George W. Bush Administration re-issued, extended, and enforced¹ a Department of Defense (DoD) Directive known as the Dover Ban. Working to prohibit the publication and broadcast of images and videos capturing any part of the process of the ritual repatriation of America's war dead, this Directive states that "there will be no arrival ceremonies for, or media coverage of, deceased military personnel returning to or departing from Ramstein or Dover AFB, to include interim stops" (cited in Gran, 2006: 6). Applicable to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom which, by the end of March 2003 had over 134,000 pairs of American boots on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq combined², by 2017 the Dover Ban had disrupted the commemoration of 6,759 American soldiers.³

In this article, I demonstrate that the Dover Ban's 2003 re-issue, extension, and enforcement are acts of American statecraft exemplifying a wider set of policies and practices working to move suffering and dead American soldiers out of the American

¹ The original Dover Ban was issued on February 2, 1991 (16 days after the commencement of Operation Desert Storm) by the DoD acting under former Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. The 2003 re-issued ban extends the reach of the initial ban including 'interim stops' such as AFB Rammstein, Germany.

² See The New York Times' *American Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq* infographic (<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/06/22/world/asia/american-forces-in-afghanistan-and-iraq.html>).

³ See DoD casualty figures as of 01/01/2017 (<http://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>).

public eye's sight during the GWoT. I do this by detailing specific updates to Army body disposal policies and repatriation practices that have worked to cleanse death and dying from American vocabulary and vision. I also explain how such practices have materialised as soldier body parts being incinerated in bulk and dumped in a Virginia land fill by military sub-contractors after a US Chinook's downing in Afghanistan in August 2011. Moreover, I argue that such policies and practices—which contrast starkly with those enacted by normally allied and militarily aligned British bodies⁴—are the result of dominant contemporary American bodies' (namely Government and military) coming to know, value, and count American soldiers as only a “precious resource” (cited in Shields 03/11/2003, par. 1) with which to fuel the geographically and temporally unbounded GWoT. However, what is puzzling is that the Dover Ban was lifted in 2009. My purpose in this article is therefore to analyse the processes, and practices through which suffering and dead American soldiers moved, not only out, but back into the public eye's sight as the GWoT went on. I do this by scrutinising a series of challenging actions including an Army base ritual, two photography projects (Suzanne Opton's *Soldiers Face* and Ashley Gilbertson's *Bedrooms of the Fallen*), a 2004 public demonstration march by anti-war activists against the Dover Ban, and a 2009 contest between DoD and the Associated Press (AP) over the eventual publication of a

⁴ See Freeden (2011) on the UK's establishment of the elaborate and widely broadcast 2007-2011 Wootton Bassett repatriation ceremonies and Zehfuss (2007) on the contrast between US DOD and the more personalised (and grievable) UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) soldier casualty listings.

photograph of fatally wounded soldier Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard. I conclude by reflecting on the contemporary political significance of the ever-shifting and intensely contested value and visibility of suffering and dead American soldiers.

To Whom Are American Soldiers Grievable?

Presented in this article, my nuanced reading of visual politics of suffering and dead American soldiers contributes to literature on the politics of grief during the GWoT (Butler 2004 and 2009; Gregory 2012; Zehfuss 2009; Hutchison and Bleiker in eds. Ahall and Gregory 2015) in three ways. I firstly problematise the notion of the eminently grievable characteristics of American soldier and civilian casualties⁵ versus those of uncounted and invisibilised enemy casualties of war (see Butler 2004; Zehfuss 2012; Gregory 2012). I secondly illustrate how competing dominant and subordinate bodies have contested the value and grievability of American soldiers injured and KIA in the GWoT. In particular I argue, drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), that instead of cultivating feelings in common throughout the body politic⁶ (as the making visible of American civilian casualties have done since

⁵ See, for example, Butler (2004) on grievable versus ungrievable lives and Auchter (2014) on the national commemoration of 9/11's American civilian victims.

⁶ I follow Stefanie Fishel (2017) to understand the body politic as comprised of lively and nested bodies.

9/11⁷), dominant contemporary American bodies have worked to prevent an emotional politics touching, gripping, and moving the American populace towards grief and mourning. Preventative efforts discussed in this article include processes and practices of statecraft un-valourizing and removing suffering and dead American soldiers from the public eye's view. Thirdly, I argue that dominant contemporary American bodies have behaved as such due to themselves being unvaluing and uncounting of soldiers' uniquely human characteristics. These are what Jenny Edkins (2011) describes as "personhood", blindness to which leads dominant bodies to regard American soldiers en masse as but a material, albeit "precious"⁸, resource with which to fuel the GWoT.⁹ Therefore, where Thomas Gregory (2012, 327) links the uncounting of civilian casualties to "the rhetoric of humanitarianism [which] operates to preclude Afghans from appearing as recognizable human beings", I link the similar uncounting of suffering and dead American soldiers by dominant contemporary American bodies' to soldiers' ejection from the category of human by the alternate means of having been made into a generic war material in the eyes of dominant bodies. I add that dominant

⁷ See Simpson's 2006 (chapter 3) analysis of The New York Times' 'Portraits of Grief' feature and both Simpson (2006) and Auchter (2014a) on the processes through which Ground Zero became sacralised, hallowed ground from and the focal point of national 9/11 memorialisation.

⁸ While serving as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Hugh Shelton asked in 2000: "Is the American public prepared for the sight of our most precious resource coming home in flag draped caskets into Dover Air Force Base?" (cited in Shields 03/11/2003, par. 1).

⁹ Posthuman literature points to science and technology as a means to explain increasingly inhuman characteristics including the unvaluing and uncounting of personhood described in this article. For example, Nicolas Rose (2001: 1) explains that biopolitics has become what he calls molecular politics because 'the truth regimes of the life sciences have mutated', while Melinda Cooper highlights 'growing institutional alliances' (2006: 14) and 'conceptual exchanges' (2006: 114) between American biomedical and biotech companies and government and military bodies.

contemporary American bodies have therefore become increasingly blind to each of the KIA's uniquely grievable characteristics. However, building on Edkins' argument that personhood "always escapes categories or governance" (2011: viii), I contend that the challenging acts discussed in this article demonstrate how soldiers' personhood remains visible to and highly valued by the American populace. Indeed, it is personhood which—eminently grievable—leads subordinate American bodies to call for the counting, accounting, and commemoration of suffering and dead American soldiers throughout the GWoT.

American soldier: carefully (state)crafted and continually contested

"Here again is Marine Sergeant Wilkins, just as he was on the flight from Afghanistan: unconscious, sedated, intubated, and encased in a vacuum spine board. The doctor tells me that the staff at LRMC removed Wilkins's breathing tube, but they had to put it back. He remains in cold storage, like some pod-person in a sci-fi film. You can hardly see him in there, inside the black plastic pod. You can't determine if he is alive or dead without looking at the little needles on the dials of the machines on the SMEED. Are they wavering? Hard to tell." (Jones 2013, 68)

Evocative of Giorgio Agamben's (1998, 165) description, of "the hospital room in which the neomort, the overcomatose person, and the faux vivant waver between life and death", journalist Anne Jones' above account, of one American soldier's journey home as a C-17's cargo, illustrates the implication of statecraft in the necropolitical¹⁰ administration and management of soldiers' deaths. However, even death brings no end to the crafting of American soldiers.

Historically, the visible repatriation of America's war-wounded and dead has been a definitive and vitally significant feature of the American war story. Thus, due to their high body counts, Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle (1999, 87) declare the American Civil War and WWII "the two most ritually successful wars" because "when we all bleed, everyone is kin" (*ibid*). However, such national binding in grief can only occur if emotions are intensified in the atmosphere in between the bodies comprising a population¹¹ to the point of making impressions upon and touching bodies (being felt).

¹⁰ In this article, I follow and build on Michel Foucault (1976) and Achille Mbembe (2003) by emphasising how dominant contemporary American bodies' necropolitical management and administration of death and ways of dying become shaded and shady as they are purposely obscured.

¹¹ Teresa Brennan (2004, 1) describes affective phenomena as inter-subjective asking: "Is there anyone who as not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?"

As Ahmed (2004, 34) explains, in order for bodies to be touched and moved by another's suffering, "such stories of pain must be heard." However, what I explain in this section is a gradual trend away from such public binding and increasing contest over the (in)visibility of suffering and dead American soldiers from Vietnam onwards.

Given the vital significance of public repatriations, particular twentieth century events and geo-political developments go some way towards explaining dominant contemporary American bodies' efforts to deny the sight of suffering and dead American soldiers. Most significantly, having made their business the material making of war, dominant contemporary American bodies came to increasingly rely upon it. For example, and despite the mobilisation of the *America First*¹² committee against American entry into WWII, the 1939 outbreak of war in Europe saw the thorough militarisation of the American economy, the creation of millions of American jobs, and US unemployment falling to an all-time low of 1.2% in 1944.¹³ In addition to this, immunity from the air raids plaguing Europe gave American manufacturers the opportunity to transform resources into war materials of all kinds. However, as the twentieth century progressed, subordinate American bodies comprising the American

¹²Associated with nationalism and anti-interventionism/isolationism, the *America First* slogan has since been appropriated by Republicans including President Trump (see Crowley 20/01/2017).

¹³See Amadeo 08/11/2016.

body politic increasingly contested the militarised logic of dominant contemporary American bodies and questioned its human toll.

Known as the “living-room war” (Arlen 1997) due to how it became the first war made visible inside American homes, the Vietnam war was found highly newsworthy by the American media and became the first war during which Americans could watch the caskets containing the bodies of the war dead being returned home, live in Technicolor. Dead American soldiers were, as Ann Scott Tyson (02/26/2009, par. 5) describes it, “rolling off planes at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii as if off a conveyor belt”. Indeed, as the Vietnam war dragged on, the sight of dead American soldiers worked to move the American population from a pro to anti-war stance. For example, with “immediate and visceral” (Cosgrove 15/05/2014, par. 2) consequences, Life magazine devoted ten pages and its June 1969 front cover to *The Faces of the American Dead in Vietnam: One Week's Toll*. Coinciding with the ever-increasing growth of the anti-Vietnam war movement,¹⁴ Life's justification for the publication *One Week's Toll* was that “we must pause to look into the faces. More than we must know how many, we

¹⁴ Gallup polls measured that between June and October 1969 American disapproval of the Vietnam war rose from 30% to 58%. See Carroll 15/06/2004.

must know who. The faces of one week's dead, unknown but to families and friends, are suddenly recognized by all" (cited in Cosgrave 5/05/2014, par. 5). Here Life's logic elucidates a desire to make unique and grievable persons visible throughout America. Indeed, in the following issue, the readers' comments section revealed the extent to which Americans were touched and moved by the sight of one week's toll. Moreover, being moved as such entailed readers questioning the US's continued involvement in Vietnam and, in particular, its human cost. Such comments include:

"I cried for those Southern black soldiers. What did they die for? Tar paper shacks, malnutrition, unemployment and degradation?" (Life August 1969, 16)

"While looking at the photographs I was shocked to see the smiling face of someone I used to know. He was only 19 years old. I guess I never realized that 19-year-olds have to die." (ibid)

There is extensive debate over the extent to which such casualty sensitivity amongst the populace leads to casualty aversion by dominant bodies.¹⁵ However, with the limited Gulf War deployment,¹⁶ President Barack Obama's light footprint military doctrine¹⁷, and the more recent hesitation and eventual covering over of American troop deployment to Syria by the President Donald Trump administration¹⁸, the Dover Ban and associated policies and practices discussed in this article are understood as an alternative strategy of American death erasure rather than American death avoidance by dominant bodies with interests in public opinion and electoral popularity. This is especially because contests over the Gulf War—including the New York Times' direct challenge to the decision to deploy even lightly¹⁹—illustrate that even light deployments do not prevent such sensitivity and sentiment.

¹⁵ For literature on American public opinion and casualty sensitivity/aversion, see Mueller 1970 and 1973, Hallin 1986 on the Vietnam war, Mueller 1994 on the Gulf War, and Gelpi *et al.* 2006 on the GWOt. The main finding within this literature is that the number of casualties has not had a direct impact on US foreign policy decisions with Gelpi *et al.* arguing alternatively that, with regard to the GWOt, the public perception of American 'success matters' more.

¹⁶ The Gulf War saw only 148 American soldiers KIA and 467 wounded (see Marvin and Ingle 1999, 88).

¹⁷ Obama's *light footprint* strategy entails moving away from soldier deployment and towards increased drone warfare and contracting to Private Military Contractors (see Krieg 2016).

¹⁸ See McIntyre 01/04/2017.

¹⁹ The New York Times' front cover asked *Is this worth dying for?* before Operation Desert Storm had begun on 10/01/1991.

As I have characterised them, dominant contemporary American bodies—increasingly reliant upon war and its making—cannot risk, abide, or afford casualty sensitivity and anti-war sentiment spreading throughout the body politic. Thus, further infitting with the hypothesis that casualty sensitivity leads to casualty aversion, expecting American casualties orders of magnitude higher than were actually accrued during the ground campaign²⁰, the original Dover Ban was introduced on February 2, 1991 (16 days after the commencement of Operation Desert Storm). However, the Ban went un-enforced.

The Gulf War's conclusion became the last time the broadcast of Dover ceremonies for the KIA and the ritual and visible return and parading of living and wounded soldiers through cities across the US marked an American war's end. As I explain in the following section, the visual politics of suffering and dead American soldiers engendered by dominant contemporary American bodies during the GWoT is starkly contrasting.

Missing in death

"You know, we don't do body counts" (General Tommy Franks 2002, Bagram AFB)

²⁰ See Broder 13/06/1991.

Made as Commander of Operation Enduring Freedom, General Tommy Franks' above cited statement—though made with reference to Afghan civilian casualties—exemplifies the attitude of dominant contemporary American bodies towards suffering and dead American soldiers throughout the GWoT: they go uncounted. However, this is not to say that soldiers have become worthless to the US Government and Army. Quite the opposite, with Auchter (2016b, par. 3) arguing that “how the dead are counted and assigned value matters just as much as which dead bodies are counted”, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Hugh Shelton's description of American soldiers as “our most precious resource” (cited in Shields 03/11/2003, par. 1) speaks directly to Nicolas Rose's post-human argument (2007: 39), that, within contemporary advanced capitalist/neo-liberal political economies, bodily matter is increasingly commodified as it is ‘extracted like a mineral, harvested like a crop, or mined like a resource.’ On top of this, Shelton's description reveals that, while uncounting of individual bodies, American soldiers as a generic material retain great value in the eyes of dominant contemporary American bodies; as a *most precious resource* with which to fuel the GWoT. Most

crucially however, during the GWoT such un-counting and re-making of American soldiers (as a precious resource in the eyes of dominant bodies) became fleshed out as updated Army repatriation, disposal, and commemoration practices. Detailed below, such processes and practices provide examples of acts of statecraft working — on top of the Dover Ban — to invisibilise suffering and dead American soldiers during the GWoT.

President George W. Bush did not attend the funeral of a single American soldier KIA in Iraq²¹ and referred to American casualties only ever in general terms,²² not counting and therefore failing to take into account—or account for—the suffering and deaths of American soldiers. Even the terminology used by the White House and DoD to refer to dead American soldiers—*the fallen*—denies that death has occurred and therefore works to erase American death. As a discursive formation, *the fallen* also works to conflate dead American soldiers and in doing so denies them as unique and grievable persons. Jones (2013, 60) similarly reports that “the word ‘dying’ is never mentioned to the family” of catastrophically and fatally injured soldiers in military hospitals. These

²¹ See Milbank 18/06/2005.

²² See DiMaggio 2015.

linguistic choices illustrate how dominant contemporary American bodies have worked to elide suffering and dead American soldiers throughout the GWoT. However, it is not only from language that suffering and dead American soldiers have been erased. The logic of dominant contemporary American bodies has also materialised as policies and practices working to physically remove from vision and destroy the bodies of American soldiers KIA—making them less visible to the American public eye. For example, in 2003, Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy admitted that planes returning wounded soldiers from Afghanistan and Iraq to DC's Joint Base Andrews (from where they would be taken on to Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre for treatment) were scheduled to land under the cover of darkness thus “making sure the press does not see the planes coming in with the suffering” (cited in Buncome 14/11/2003, par. 4). Similarly, Jones (2013, 33) finds that at the US Army's Bagram Air Base “the suffering are carried into the hospital by the back door”. Here, the re-scheduling of aircraft and re-routing of ambulances carrying America's war wounded and dead are acts exemplifying the determination of dominant contemporary American bodies to keep suffering and dead American soldiers out of sight. Moreover, what replaced the Dover Ceremony after its 2003 ban (a procedure known as the Dignified Transfer) illustrates the further

implications of the uncounting of America's war dead since 9/11. Carried out "as quickly as possible" (Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations 2017, par. 3), during Dignified Transfers it is not bodies but *the remains* of the KIA that are collected up and sealed inside a *human remains pouch* before being placed inside a *transfer case* and *transfer vehicle* (*ibid*). Providing another example of American statecraft working to keep soldier suffering and death out of sight, these shifts in lexicon—from body to remains, from body bag to human remains pouch, from memorial ceremony to dignified transfer, from casket to transfer case, and from hearse to transfer vehicle—amount to the erasure of dead American soldiers and of death itself from the official narrative of war.

Further illustrating the increasingly rapid and focused work of dominant contemporary American bodies to make those KIA less visible is the Government and Army's response to the downing of a US Army Chinook helicopter in Wardak, Afghanistan in 2011. Shot down while carrying 30 American soldiers, including 15 Navy SEALs, the incident became the deadliest single American loss since Operation Enduring Freedom began in October 2001.

Much like the bodies of those who died inside the World Trade Center on 9/11—that went missing due to the intensity of the impact and heat causing an obscene “conflation of boundaries” (Edkins 2011, 19)—the Chinook’s crash landing left the dead bodies of those on board indistinguishable from one another and the rest of the debris. As Jones (2013, 168) explains, “their bodies were so conjoined in death with the wreckage of that Chinook that, as the President later explained to their families, the remains of individual men could not be separated out”. However, providing a stark contrast to the painstaking efforts to forensically identify each and every last piece of each and every single last civilian killed on 9/11²³, the Washington Times reports that without familial consent all bodily remains salvaged from the crash site were incinerated in bulk on the orders of “senior US military officials” (Kuhner 09/08/2013, par. 6). However, the mass incineration of dead American soldiers and body parts from the Chinook crash was not an isolated incident. Indeed, in 2011 the Air Force admitted that, between 2004 and 2008, 976 dead soldier body parts belonging to 274 persons KIA were incinerated at the Dover’s Charles C. Carson Centre for Mortuary Affairs before being passed to a Private

²³ See Edkins 2011, chapter 5.

Military Contractor (PMCs) that dumped them in a Virginia landfill.²⁴ At the same time it was revealed that Air Force morticians had “lost a dead soldier’s ankle and...sawed off a Marine’s arm so his body would fit in his casket” (Whitlock and Jaffe 09/11/2011, par. 12). Such disposal practices are at absolute odds with the traditional military burials and commemoration practices such as that exemplified by the Dover Ceremony. As discussed above, historically the return of wounded and dead American soldiers has been seen and felt throughout the body politic. However, on their return to American soil (and despite the Dover Ban’s partial lift in 2009), there were no Dover ceremonies held for the 30 KIA in the downed Chinook while the media were banned from attending or covering the dignified transfers at all. Moreover, the practices discussed within this section illustrate how dead soldiers KIA have been treated as literally disposable²⁵ by dominant contemporary American bodies regarding them as nothing more than an expendable resource and war material. Thus, where Auchter (2014a, 31) argues that “what is done with dead bodies is a key part of identity”, the un-naming and refusal to identify the bodies of those KIA in the downed Chinook provides a further example of the materialisation of the logic of dominant contemporary American bodies. Indeed, the Chinook case illustrates how “a politics of the what, not the who” (Edkins

²⁴ See Whitlock and Jaffe 09/11/2011.

²⁵ See Giroux, 01/09/2006.

2011, 9) becomes fleshed out. In this case, dominant contemporary American bodies' failure to count or account for personhood materialised as the disposal of bodily, soldier-derived war material in the same manner as non-human battlefield waste and debris disposal: as un-commemorated landfill.

Suffering and dead soldiers appear

"That which is dumped as trash emerges to haunt us, demanding justice" (Jenna Brager 12/05/15, par. 14)

As I have illustrated so far, throughout the GWoT dominant contemporary American bodies have worked increasingly determinedly to move suffering and dead American soldiers out of the American public eye's sight. The KIA were dumped as trash in landfills by military bodies uncounting and unvaluing of personhood and alternatively regarding soldiers' physical bodies as a generic—albeit *precious*—material resource with which to fuel the GWoT. As an example of what Gregory (2016, 7) describes as "exclusionary violence", the practices and processes of statecraft discussed thus far materialised in forms including speech acts, policies, regulations, directives, and practices working to depersonalise and make the wounded and KIA less visible to the American public eye. However, following Auchter (2014a, 170) to understand statecraft as a process that is "never fully and finally completed," opportunities to challenge its

(de)ontologising work to make and move bodies and things (including soldiers and wars) are possible. Within this section, I therefore turn to appraise the efforts of subordinate bodies and find low-ranking US Army personnel and artist/photographers working to move suffering American soldiers and the KIA back into the American public eye's sight.

In the US Army, there is a ritual whereby, after the death of a soldier KIA, their enlistment photograph—a standardised headshot taken in uniform in front of the *Star Spangled Banner*—is stuck up on base. Jones (2013, 8) comments on the particular dynamic of (in)visibility at play in this ritual saying that “while the nondescript official photo is mounted on the wall, the actual body of the ‘fallen’ soldier is gathered up and carried away”. As I have illustrated above, throughout the GWoT dominant American bodies have gone to great lengths to conceal the transportation, repatriation, and disposal of dead soldiers KIA as a means to prevent their commemoration. However, through the act of sticking up a photograph of the KIA on notice boards, Army colleagues demonstrate their alternate desire to pay a personal tribute, by making visible in public the face of the one they knew. These soldiers’ gesture therefore provides the first example of a practice enacted by subordinated bodies that challenges dominant bodies’ uncounting of soldiers’ personhood, by making visible and encouraging the commemoration of American soldiers KIA. Providing a second example, artist and

photographer Suzanne Opton's nine *Soldiers Face* billboards do the same on a larger scale (see Figure 1). Selected by Opton from an archive of photographs of over 90 American soldiers taken at Fort Drum in between tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, Opton's images make American soldiers visible not only to military colleagues but to the wider American public.²⁶ Furthermore, described by viewers as "haunting...shell shocked...terribly vulnerable" (cited in Casper 2016, par. 3), the soldiers' faces photographed by Opton challenge the American soldiers' generic warrior identity so carefully crafted by dominant contemporary American bodies by bringing the traumatic violence of war (normally unseen and unfelt by the American public eye) decidedly into the frame.

²⁶ Opton's Soldier Billboards, billboards appeared in eight US cities 2008-2010. The project was sponsored by the Denver Contemporary Museum, Denver, CO; DiverseWorks, Houston, TX; The Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA; Forecast Public Art, Minneapolis, MN; SkyLab, Columbus, OH, Sanctuary for Independent Media, Troy, NY; DC metro stations. See <http://www.soldiersface.com/>.



Figure 1: Soldier, by Suzanne Opton.²⁷

One further photographic series working to challenge the attempted invisibilisation of suffering and dead American soldiers during the GWoT is Ashley Gilbertson's *Bedrooms of the Fallen*. This photo series, exhibited widely, featured in the American news-media and published as a book,²⁸ depicts the empty bedrooms of 40 soldiers KIA in Afghanistan and Iraq—the equivalent of a single platoon (see Figure 2). Furthermore, in the book, Gilbertson captions each photograph similarly and simply, with details akin to those normally found on a traditional graveyard headstone (the name, age, date and place of death of each soldier KIA). The photographs themselves are presented

²⁷ Figure 1: Soldier, by Suzanne Opton. Included with the photographer's kind permission.

²⁸ As the sleeve to the 2014 book details, "Gilbertson's photographs have appeared in the New York Times Magazine, Stern, and other publications. His work is included in collections of major museums throughout the United States, Europe, and Australia."

uniformly—shot on black and white film and taken with a panoramic camera and extreme wide angle lens “so that the viewer could digest as much of the detail as possible” (Gilbertson 2014, 88). It is however what these photographs do not show that makes them so very relevant towards my aim in this section (to highlight and analyse practices challenging the attempted invisibilisation of suffering and dead American soldiers discussed thus far).



Figure 2: *Bedroom of the fallen Marine Corporal Christopher G Sherer, 21, from East Northport, New York. KIA by a sniper on July 21, 2007, in Karmah, Iraq by Ashley Gilbertson.*²⁹

Gilbertson's photographs do not show dead American soldiers and in this way seemingly present no challenge to the aforementioned efforts of dominant bodies to move them out of sight. However, by keeping bodies out of the frame, Gilbertson's images follow and exaggerate the dynamic of (in)visibility engendered by practices and

²⁹ Figure 2: *Bedroom of the fallen Marine Corporal Christopher G Sherer, 21, from East Northport, New York. KIA by a sniper on July 21, 2007, in Karmah, Iraq by Ashley Gilbertson.* Included with the photographer's kind permission.

processes of American statecraft working to make those KIA since 9/11 invisible and in doing so present their challenge. This is because Gilbertson's photographs, while not showing the dead soldier, make each soldier's unique and uniquely human qualities (their personhood) visible through their foregrounding of personal things including books, magazines, band posters, DVDs, baseball cap collections, and dirty laundry. Thus, where Gilbertson (2014, 87) recalls his wife Joanne agreeing that "you need to humanise them, to show us that they were people first, kids even, before they were soldiers," *Bedrooms of the Fallen* works to challenge practices and processes of American statecraft by evoking and inviting commemoration of the irreplaceable and grievable persons KIA. In short, while the body itself remains invisible, *Bedrooms of the Fallen* makes each unique person knowable and visible—glaringly so. What *Bedrooms of the Fallen* also reveals and shows is the very lack of bodies produced by the practices of statecraft discussed above as, in omitting bodies from the frame, Gilbertson exaggerates the lack, making it the un-pictured object of each photograph. In this way, the bedrooms photographed by Gilbertson—and in turn Gilbertson's photographs—are haunted by their former inhabitants and in being so exemplify the argument made by Avery Gordon that "that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence" (Gordon 1997, 17).

Bodies moving

In addition to the challenging actions discussed so far, In March 2004, a collective formed of military families and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) gathered in Dover, DE to specifically challenge the DoD's Directive. They would march from the AFB to the White House via the Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre to protest the ban. Stating the purpose of their march as "a memorial procession for mourning and truth to pull back the veil, honour and mourn the dead and acknowledge the wounded" (*Military Families Speak Out* 11/03/2004, par. 1), the coalitions' demand for the President George W. Bush Administration was for it to "start telling the truth, stop hiding the toll" (*ibid*). Jane Bright, the mother of 24-year-old Evan Bright (a soldier KIA in July 2003) similarly told the AP that her personal motivation for joining the march was the belief that "we need to stop hiding the deaths of our young; we need to be open about their deaths" (cited in Chase 23/04/2004, par. 9). Providing further examples of subordinate bodies challenging the logic of dominant bodies, in these enunciations (in)visibility is repeatedly evoked as *pulling back the veil* and *revealing the toll* are identified as the movement's motivations. Furthermore, the movement's march works to contest the boundary crafted around what can and can't be seen by the American public eye, and in doing so, begins to move it. In this case, commemoration of the dead KIA moved from private, invisible spaces and into public. However, despite the challenges detailed above, the Dover Ban would persist until February 26, 2009 (after the election

of President Obama, whose administration prioritised transparency from its outset³⁰). On this date, then Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates replaced the Ban with a policy allowing the families of those KIA to decide whether or not to allow the news media to attend, photograph/film and report their dead relatives' dignified transfer.³¹

The Dover Ban's 2009 revoke is significant because it provides a most explicit example of a dominant contemporary American body (in this case DoD) being moved to update a policy due to contestation and challenges emerging from subordinate body parts comprising the American whole. Moreover, the policy update works in turn to move dead American soldiers back into the American public eye's view. However, Gates' 2009 policy update is an exception to the rule, as through it only the dignified transfers of those KIA in either Operations Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom—not Operation Inherent Resolve and/or future operations—are made visible to the American public eye. As an additional limitation to the ban's lift, even when the KIA's next of kin does give their permission for the media to cover a repatriation, they (the KIA's families etc.) are forbidden by the Army from speaking to journalists. Therefore, while the limit to what may be seen by the American public eye may have been formally renegotiated in part, the conditions attached to the Dover Ban's partial revoke reveal the determination

³⁰ On his first day in office, President Obama issued a Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies on Transparency and Open Government: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/.

³¹ See Bumiller 07/12/2009.

of dominant contemporary American bodies to contain public grief and keep soldier death in the shadows. Given this post-Dover state of play, within the following section I detail how, since the Dover Ban's partial revoke in 2009, contestation over the visibility of dead American soldiers has not ceased but alternatively goes on and on. In particular, contest between AP and DoD over a photograph—of Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard—illustrates that the Dover Ban's revoke made dominant contemporary American bodies no less determined to keep suffering and dead American soldiers hidden from the American public eye's view. Conversely, other subordinate yet challenging bodies, remain intent to count and account for American soldiers' suffering and deaths in public.

Bodies in contest over Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard

"I am the Secretary of Defence and I am begging you not to run that picture" (Robert Gates 2014, 363)

In September 2009, just six months after personally lifting the Dover Ban, Secretary Gates found himself calling and writing to the AP's then President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Thomas Curley for the purpose of, in his own words (included above), *begging* the AP not to publish a photograph. Depicting 21-year-old Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard lying fatally wounded after being hit in the legs by a rocket propelled grenade in Dahaneh, Afghanistan, the photograph (see Figure 3) was taken by Julie

Jacobson, an AP photographer embedded with the US Marines and published in the AP's *Buffalo News*³² on September 4, 2009. Within this section I detail the significance of the photograph, controversy surrounding it, and the movements its eventual publication engendered.



Figure 3: Joshua Bernard, AP Photo/Julie Jacobson.³³

For my purpose of exploring the processes and practices through which suffering and dead American soldiers have moved in and out of sight in during the GWoT, the content of Jacobsen's photograph is significant in itself. This is because it places a suffering and bloody American soldier's body into the very centre of the frame. In doing so,

³² In addition to its publication in the *Buffalo News*, other American newspapers—including the *Arizona Republic*, *The Washington Times* and the *Orlando Sentinel*—ran other photos from Jacobson's series while several newspaper websites—including the *Akron Beacon-Journal* and the *St. Petersburg Times*—published the image online (<http://www.politico.com/story/2009/09/gates-ap-decision-appalling-026759>).

³³ Figure 3: Joshua Bernard, AP Photo/Julie Jacobson. Photograph included with kind permission of the AP.

Jacobsen's photograph of Bernard is emotionally disturbing and disturbing of the (state)crafted American soldier (re)made by dominant contemporary American bodies as generic warriors.³⁴ Jacobsen's photograph disturbs in these ways because it alternatively reveals the absolute vulnerability and precariousness of a soldier's body and makes Bernard's pain public. Thus, adding in his letter to Curley that the photograph should be suppressed because "those of us who have not lost loved ones in war can never know what it feels like...I cannot imagine the pain and suffering Lance Corporal Bernard's death has caused his family" (Gates 09/04/2009, par. 3-4), Gates also divulges an underestimation of the American bodies discussed within this article. As the challenging images and actions discussed demonstrate, the population of bodies comprising the American body politic know each other as unique, irreplaceable, and grievable persons despite and in spite of the war hungry logic leading dominant contemporary American bodies to regard American soldiers as only war material. The challenging actions discussed in this article have alternatively demonstrated that what happens to one body does indeed affect another, and that even apparently disparate bodies can become touched and moved by the war wounding and death of American soldiers.

³⁴ Thus, through a discursive shift occurring since 9/11, the US Army increasingly characterises and refers to its soldiers as warriors. See, for example, the Army Warrior Transition Command unit: <http://www.wtc.army.mil/modules/soldier/s2-aw2EligibilityEnrollment.html>.

In addition to its contents and framing, the publication of Jacobsen's photograph is also significant due to its timing and the very specific military/political context out of which it emerged. To provide more detail, five weeks before Bernard's death Gen. Stanley McChrystal (at the time serving as the senior American commander in Afghanistan) updated the rules of engagement governing conduct in Afghanistan. These updated rules worked to limit the use of airstrikes and required US troops to break off combat when Afghan civilians were present, even if it meant letting the enemy escape.³⁵ With Bernard's death occurring during what was by then the most deadly month in Afghanistan for American soldiers, McChrystal's updated rules were linked in public discourse to the ever-increasing war toll. Thus, in his justification for the AP's publication of Jacobson's photograph, Curley argues that "the American people needed to know what the strategy was, and we had been looking for some time to illustrate it. And the way you illustrate it is with the personalized version" (Curley cited in Gilsinan 2010, 16). Thus, in being explicitly linked by the AP to the ever-increasing American toll of the GWOt, the image of Bernard works as an interruption of normally invisibilised soldier personhood into the American public eye's view.

On its eventual publication in the Buffalo News, Jacobsen's photograph was captioned as follows:

³⁵ See "Fallen Marine's father speaks out", *BDN Maine*, 13/10/2009.

"In this photo taken Friday, Aug. 14, 2009, Lance Cpl. Joshua Bernard is tended to by fellow U.S. Marines after being hit by a rocket propelled grenade during a firefight against the Taliban in the village of Dahaneh in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. Bernard was transported by helicopter to Camp Leatherneck where he later died of his wounds." (Allen 04/09/2009, par. 10)

This framing, like the short captions accompanying Gilbertson's photographs of *Bedrooms of the Fallen*, further encourages public feelings and the commemoration of a unique person killed. Moreover, Buffalo News offers a narrative counter to the depersonalised and death cleansed story of war provided by dominant contemporary American bodies throughout the GWoT.

Conclusion

*"ain't no grave can hold my body down"*³⁶ (Claud Ely, 1941)

On December 21, 2015, six American soldiers were KIA when a suicide bomb detonated inside Bagram AFB. Its wearer had ridden a motorcycle on to the base and died along with two American civilians and one Afghan when the bomb detonated.

³⁶ *Ain't no Grave* is a gospel song by Claud Ely.

Providing a stark contrast to the stories I have told and the photographs I have discussed within this article, and to again illustrate the unending contestation over the (in)visibility of suffering and dead American soldiers, these soldiers' deaths were publicly mourned and memorialised in two elaborate memorial ceremonies featured widely within the American and international mainstream news media.³⁷

Exemplary of a stark divergence from the updated rituals of soldier body disposal discussed within this article, at the Bagram ceremony a photograph of each soldier's face was displayed and accompanied an empty pair of desert boots and a helmet propped on top of a gun. Here, reminiscent of the dynamic of (in)visibility at play within Gilbertson's photographs of *Bedrooms of the Fallen*, the objects on display during the 2015 Bagram ceremony invoke the very flesh and bones of the dead soldier—with the gun standing in by having the soldiers' helmet balanced upon it. Indeed, with each photograph displayed by the Army a personal photograph rather than the standard issue Army enlistment headshot, on top of invoking the material body the Army also make visible and in doing so invite commemoration of each unique person KIA. Finally, on their repatriation to New Castle AFB, in scenes reminiscent of the original Dover ceremony, Defence Secretary Ash Carter and Air Force Secretary

³⁷ Services took place at Bagram and New Castle AFBs and news outlets featuring the story and photographs include The New York Times, The Guardian, The Daily Mail, CNN, USA Today, Al Jazeera, The Independent, and ABC News.

Deborah James not only attended but with stony faces made the military hand salute as the six flag-draped coffins were unloaded from a military aircraft carrier, carried across the tarmac, and placed into waiting hearses' by uniformed American soldiers. These televised and touching scenes, to which the American public bore witness, reveal the GWOT's American toll, cultivate grief, and invite commemoration throughout the American body politic.

With my initial interest in this case sparked by the Dover Ban's puzzling revoke, my analysis of the (in)visibility of suffering and dead American soldiers throughout the GWOT has underlined the status of injured as well as living and dead bodies³⁸ as social and political actors. I have done this by drawing attention to the often overlooked, yet performative, lively, and ontologically insecure human body in life, injury, and death. Moreover, the case presented has shown that, marking the very limit of the visible in the contemporary American context, suffering and dead American soldiers have time and again forced moments of politics due to being known, counted, and making other bodies feel differently. Indeed, through the Dover Ban's partial revoke, in 2009 the parameter of what can(/not) be seen by the American public's eye was successfully renegotiated by subordinate yet challenging bodies contesting the (re)making of American soldiers as a

³⁸ Lauren Wilcox (2014 and 2015) has thoroughly detailed IR's oversight of the efficacy of bodies in general while Jessica Auchter has made concerted efforts (2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, and Auchter in ed. Salter 2015) to ensure that IR is "paying attention to dead bodies" (2016a, 1).

war material and precious resource and working to visibilise each uniquely grievable person injured and KIA. My discussion of the rival acts mounted has therefore also intervened into debates over the efficacy of the American anti-war movement (Pershing and Yocom 1996; Coy et al. 2008; Butterworth and Moskal 2009; Mangahan 2011). As the actions discussed show, regardless of the challenging impetus to make suffering and dead American soldiers visible, the public sight of suffering and dead American soldiers works to move bodies comprising the American body politic towards commemoration, counting, and attempts to account for soldier suffering and death. Therefore, and while it has been beyond the scope of this article to gauge the American public's opinions on ongoing US military operations, the empirical examples discussed suggest that being moved as such involves at least questioning the cost and value of war—its human toll in particular.

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