

Honouring the Dead Without Hypocrisy
J.L. Granatstein

Is there no limit? Is there nothing politicians will not do to capitalize on the misery of others and to obscure their own role in that misery?

Canadians have just endured the deaths of four soldiers in Afghanistan, four young men killed by an improvised explosive device that destroyed their vehicle. That is bad enough, but the casualties were the subject of pages of coverage in the national media and then of an unseemly squabble in Parliament and the press over the proper ways of honouring their sacrifice.

What is important in this unseemly affair is the hypocrisy of the politicians, all the politicians, and the media. The press have seized on the government's decision to treat the arrival of the servicemen's coffins at CFB Trenton as a family matter as a way of chastising Prime Minister Harper for his general attitude to the media. No journalist says this is the reason, but let us be very clear: it is. Give us more access, Prime Minister, the implicit message is, or we the media will make your life unbearable.

Not that the Prime Minister and the government deserve much sympathy here. The decision to bar the press from the Trenton ceremonies was made without consulting the soldiers' families. Most of us likely prefer to mourn our dead in private, but some may differ. As a minimum, the government ought to have asked before issuing its ukase.

Then there is the real reason for the government's press ban—the all too obvious concern that the attention paid the casualties will impact on the already shaky support for the Afghan War and, perhaps, hurt the government's chances of re-election. There is some hypocrisy shaping the government's actions.

There is more hypocrisy in the Opposition ranks. To have the New Democratic Party's spokesmen calling for the lowering of the flag on government buildings might be barely tolerable if the NDP had ever called for more money to be spent on the Canadian Forces. If the NDP had ever supported giving the CF the proper equipment to carry out its roles. If the New Democrats had ever preached for anything except the most benign blue beret peacekeeping as the only acceptable role for our troops. If the NDP had ever done anything for the men and women in uniform except to capitalize on their deaths. The blatant hypocrisy here is frankly stomach-turning.

The NDP hypocrisy is exceeded, hard as that might be to imagine, by that of the Liberals. The Chrétien government for a decade and more starved the military of funds and failed to replace its obsolescent equipment. The latest casualties near Kandahar died in a G-Wagon, one of the vehicles hastily secured when the wretched Iltis jeeps proved too vulnerable even for the Liberals who had unhesitatingly sent our soldiers into harm's way in unarmoured, ancient equipment. I suppose we ought to be grateful that SeaKing helicopters weren't sent to Kandahar. For the next generation or so, common decency suggests that the Liberals should be very cautious in attacking the Conservatives on defence matters.

And then there is Ujjal Dosanjh, the Liberal Opposition Defence critic, who has taken the lead in attacking the government on the flag issue. To be blunt, Dosanjh knows nothing of defence and cares nothing for it. He criticizes for the sake of criticizing, and the best he can do is to attack Prime Minister for, he says, trying to act presidential and aping President George W. Bush by keeping the media away from Trenton. Anti-

Americanism is always the last refuge of Canadian scoundrels, and Dosanjh's hypocrisy stands high even in a crowded field. He shamefully seeks to profit politically from the dead. No one in Ottawa comes out of this sorry affair with credit.

To be fair, that is not wholly true. The Royal Canadian Legion and the National Council of Veterans Associations have stoutly maintained that all soldiers' deaths should be honoured on November 11, Remembrance Day. The Legion and the NCVA are right. So too are the Canadian soldiers serving in Afghanistan. They too would prefer that the media stay away from Trenton and that their comrades be re-united quietly with their families. In an age of hypocrisy, the vets and the soldiers alone understand how to act.

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