# Why presidents stumble in this most solemn task

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President Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan honor the victims of the bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, on April 23, 1983.

Circa Images/GHI/Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group/Getty Images
After ordering US troops to execute a regime change in Panama in 1989, President George H.W. Bush held a press conference at the precise moment the first US casualties were arriving on US soil.

TV networks showed the events on a split screen.

Bush opened the press conference with a joke about keeping things brief because he had a "pain in the neck."

He was later asked, "Was it really worth it to send people to their deaths to get (Gen. Manuel) Noriega?"

His answer, according to the New York Times, “sounded pained, and he paused often. He said: ‘Every human life is precious. And yet I have to answer, yes, it has been worth it.’”

That’s got to be an honest answer for a president, but it’s not empathetic for a politician. Trump has also suggested there is a calculus to the lives of service members.

“We expect casualties,” Trump warned Americans in an interview last Sunday, “but in the end it’s going to be a great deal for the world.”

By the time H.W. Bush was ordering troops into harm’s way during the first 1991 Gulf War in the Middle East, the Pentagon had changed the rules, largely barring the media from covering the arrival of American remains.

Trump, on the other hand, traveled to Dover, Delaware, on Saturday to attend the arrival of the remains of six service members killed so far during US and Israel’s war on Iran.

The past few decades have seen multiple reversals in how presidents treat the solemn task of bringing back the flag-draped transfer cases that hold remains of troops killed overseas on their watch, which today is referred to as a dignified transfer.

## Carter and Reagan met the arrival of the dead at Andrews

When eight US commandos were killed in a failed attempt to rescue hostages in Iran during Jimmy Carter’s presidency, Carter stood watch when their remains arrived at what was then called Andrews Air Force Base, according to a timeline from the transparency group National Security Archive, which works to make government documents public. Carter also eulogized them at Arlington National Cemetery.

That failed rescue attempt hurt Carter’s chances at reelection. The hostages were released by the Iranian regime in the moments after Reagan took office in 1981.

When 258 Marines were killed in their barracks by a bomb in Beirut, President Ronald Reagan at Andrews for the arrival of their remains. Iran was suspected of involvement through its support of the terror group Hezbollah. Reagan would later declare Iran to be a state sponsor of terrorism, but that didn’t stop Reagan’s administration from later sending arms to Iran in exchange for hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iran-Contra affair was a major scandal of Reagan’s presidency.

## H.W. Bush banned media coverage

H.W. Bush’s administration would institute its ban on media coverage of dignified transfers during the first Gulf War, a ban would stay in place for decades, though there were some exceptions.

The ban was expanded during the Middle East wars undertaken by George W. Bush, when the press was largely barred, with some notable exceptions, from covering the arrival of American dead. After a Freedom of Information Act fight over photos of coffins, the second Bush administration largely stopped Pentagon photographers from taking pictures, according to the National Security Archive's timeline.

## W. Bush stayed away; Obama reversed course

W. Bush did not attend the arrival of dead troops in Dover, Delaware, on the logic that it would be a distraction for grieving families.

But the criticism of the coverage ban was also correct – that the US public did not see some of the most painful domestic consequences of the war.

President Barack Obama's Pentagon changed the policy not long after he took office in 2009, allowing for photos and coverage of the dignified transfers as long as the family of the fallen service member permitted it.



President Barack Obama salutes during the dignified transfer of Sergeant Dale R. Griffin of Terre Haute, Indiana, at Dover Air Force Base in Dover, Delaware, on October 29, 2009.

Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

Obama would later attend dignified transfers, setting a precedent followed by Trump and President Joe Biden and offering what Obama called a "sobering reminder" of sacrifice.

Now dignified transfers are part of the ugly political debate

Biden came under intense scrutiny, and criticism from the family members of dead service members, for repeatedly checking his watch between salutes at the dignified transfer for service members killed at Abbey Gate as the US withdrew from Afghanistan. Family members also said he spent too much time talking about his own son Beau — a veteran who died of cancer, as opposed to their loved ones, who were killed in action.

Trump seized on that criticism, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, as a major campaign issue in 2024 and featured Gold Star family members at the GOP convention that year.

## Trump's complicated history with war dead

Trump controversially posted video of himself visiting graves of Abbey Gate service members at Arlington National Cemetery during the campaign. While Trump was invited by a family member, the visit may also have violated cemetery rules about using the hallowed site for political purposes.

Trump on Saturday was present for the arrival of the six servicemembers killed by an Iranian drone in Kuwait. He was also present for the arrival of the remains of troops killed in Syria during his presidency.

But he has also faced criticism for his comments about war dead.



President-elect Donald Trump visits section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, on January 19, 2025, ahead of his presidential inauguration.

Carlos Barria/Reuters

His former Chief of Staff John Kelly, a retired lieutenant general who lost his own son in Iraq, said Trump maligned war dead on multiple occasions. These included a trip to France during his first term when Trump did not want to visit the graves of American soldiers buried in the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery near Paris because, “Why should I go to that cemetery? It’s filled with losers,” The Atlantic reported.

During that same trip to France, according to the article, Trump said the 1,800 US Marines killed in the Belleau Wood were “suckers” for getting killed.

Kelly later confirmed the reporting to CNN’s Jake Tapper.

Now Trump will have the burden of overseeing the return of remains from a war he ordered.