

FRANK R. LAUTENBERG

NEW JERSEY

COMMITTEES:

APPROPRIATIONS

BUDGET

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND
TRANSPORTATION

ENVIRONMENT AND
PUBLIC WORKS

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 9, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama,

I am writing to bring to your attention a flawed policy prohibiting media access to the arrival of flag-draped military caskets from overseas.

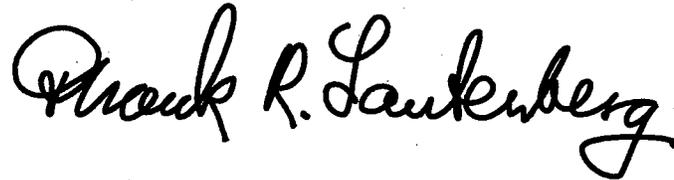
Throughout our nation's history, it has been a tradition for our nation to honor fallen military men and women when their flag-draped caskets are flown home from war operations overseas. Seeing these returning caskets prompts a national sense of shared pain and sacrifice, as well as gratitude and pride. Throughout the 1980s, Presidents Carter and Reagan attended public ceremonies for troops' returning coffins, including the 241 Marines killed in Beirut in 1983. Media had full access to such ceremonies.

President George H.W. Bush issued an executive order in early 1991 prohibiting media coverage of caskets returning to Dover, Delaware – the main arrival base for troops who have perished. Although the executive order remained in place throughout the 1990s, the Clinton administration did not enforce it, allowing photos of caskets periodically at Dover and consistently at Andrews Air Force Base. When sailors were killed on the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen in 2000, for example, President Clinton approved the distribution of photos of homecoming caskets arriving to Dover.

Regrettably, the open access policy changed once again in 2003 just as the U.S. invasion of Iraq began, when the Department of Defense issued the following directive: "There will be no arrival ceremonies for, or media coverage of, deceased military personnel returning to or departing from Ramstein, Germany, airbase or Dover base." With this order, the Administration effectively censored images of flag-draped caskets from appearing in media coverage. As a result, the American public was denied the opportunity to grieve and honor the sacrifice of more than 4,000 service men and women who died over the past five years. In 2004, I offered an amendment on the Senate floor directing the Department of Defense to develop a protocol to allow the media to respectfully cover the return to the U.S. of these heroes killed abroad, while preserving the privacy of the families. While my amendment did not become law, I strongly believe such a protocol should be established.

I respectfully urge you to work to bring an end to the misguided policies of the past that seek to hide the sacrifice of our soldiers and the public recognition and pride that should accompany it. I appreciate your consideration, and I look forward to working with you on this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank R. Lautenberg". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "F" and a long, sweeping underline.