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Team Trump and the altercation at the Arlington military cemetery

By Natalie Jester

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In August 2024, in the lead up to the US presidential elections, Donald Trump travelled with his team to an event at Arlington National Cemetery. The [Washington Post](#) has described it as “sacred ground for many Americans,” with a cemetery statement saying “ANC is a national shrine to the honored dead of the Armed Forces.” The media had not been allowed to accompany Trump’s team to a specific part of the cemetery (Section 60) that is reserved for the most recent graves. The issue arose because the Trump team’s own photographer and videographer sought to capture images of Trump in this space. At this point, a physical altercation occurred between his team and an Arlington employee.

Trump and his supporters have created a strong online presence. Images and videos captured at Arlington were to be shared with them, across platforms. There is a TikTok of the visit, in addition to images posted on X (formerly Twitter) ([Washington Post](#)). Previously the rules around media attendance had been effective in preventing the portrayal of the most sensitive parts of Arlington. The changing (new) media landscape means that the rules have less of an impact because Team Trump can post their own images, with massive public reach. This received widespread coverage in the (old) media, across the spectrum of political leanings. Coverage of this event tells us a lot about the relationship between the political establishment and the military, especially around the labels of “politics” and “neutrality,” and media coverage of political norms.

As another [Washington Post](#) article about the Arlington incident puts it, Trump behaves “in ways that flout American norms.” Trump has some quirks when it comes to press and publicity, including his tendency to smile and give the thumbs up at inappropriate moments. One example of this here is the thumbs up he gave at the grave of Marine Sergeant Nicole Gee ([Washington Post](#)). Beyond military interactions, Trump is someone who ignores social norms and simply does what he wants (for more on this, see [Pfiffner 2021](#)). This is a behaviour that seems to appeal to the section of the electorate who “don’t like being told what to do” by government or society.

Given the Trump brand of acting as he pleases, it is interesting that press coverage of the incident quotes his team emphasising that they did have permission. Whilst Trump and his team therefore are happy to break many norms, the triangle between Trump, the military, and war dead appears to be an area where this is at least partially constrained (e.g. [Fox News](#)). Another [Fox News](#) article also quotes Trump himself: “they [Biden and Harris] tell me that I used their graves for public relations services, and I didn’t.” This tells us something about the reverence that many Americans have for the military as an institution. Interestingly, other coverage of Trump’s relationship with the military highlights that he was able to avoid the military draft in Vietnam ([Washington Post](#)), but mostly this was not a focus.

The incident also reminds us that some things are labelled “political” and other things are not. There is a federal-level law that “prohibits “partisan political activities” at national military cemeteries” ([Washington Post](#)) and a different article notes that the military was wary of being sucked into “politics,” giving the Trump team ground rules for their visit ([Washington Post](#)). As this [Washington Post](#) article says, the military was trying to enforce the “no politics rule” at Arlington when the altercation occurred. This was also echoed by remarks from military personnel, who feel that “self-serving” activities such as videoing Section 60 are not compatible with military ethos ([Washington Post](#)). Trump opponent Kamala Harris is quoted in one [Fox News](#) article promising to “never

politicize” the military (another [Fox News](#) article accused Harris of “playing politics” in her criticism of the incident). The bounds of what counts as “political” are therefore contested and played out within the media.

Central to the idea of what counts as “political” is the role of military families, across both right and left-leaning publications. Families of dead soldiers are quoted throughout the reporting. Some are in support of Trump, saying they had invited him to visit their loved ones’ graves at Arlington. Counter to accusations of being self-serving, one family member is quoted in [Fox News](#) as saying “Why did we want Trump there? It wasn't to help his political campaign ... We wanted a leader. That explains why you and Joe didn't get a call.” Other articles quote bereaved families saying that his visit was not appropriate and “there’s just no respect” ([Washington Post](#)). Collectively, this chimes with a rich body of work demonstrating the importance of military families in legitimising military activities (see, e.g. [Cree 2019](#); [Enloe 2014](#)). It also demonstrates that they are an important force within the de/legitimation of political candidates domestically.