

Buried by the government

By [David Heim](#)

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A recent episode of PBS's *American Experience* explored how the massive number of deaths in the Civil War sent the nation into shock. The catastrophe—750,000 dead—was equivalent to the U.S. suffering 7 million deaths today. Besides evoking this ghastly experience, Ric Burns's film [Death and the Civil War](#) (reviewed [here in the New York Times](#)), which is based on Drew Gilpin's book [The Republic of Suffering](#), offers a fascinating perspective on current political debates over the size and scope of the federal government.

The waves of death on the battlefields prompted the federal government to take over an activity that was once reserved for families—the task of burying dead soldiers. Until midway through the war, neither civil nor military authorities in the North took responsibility for the bodies of those killed in battle or even for reporting the names of the dead. It was up to families to figure out where and how a loved one died, locate the body and arrange for a proper burial. This task was logistically impossible for most families, especially when battlefields were hundreds or thousands of mile from home.

Prodded by desperate, grieving families, the Union took on the enormous work of identifying bodies—often retrieving them from mass graves—and providing individual gravestones. This led to the creation of military cemeteries, beginning with the one at Gettysburg.

From one perspective, this expanded role for the federal government was necessary and admirable. As the families of the dead argued, the government that sent these men to their deaths could at the very least account for their deaths and assure them a decent burial.

From another—call it the “antigovernment” or “small government”—perspective, however, this expansion of federal authority could certainly be seen as a usurpation of the role of the family. Should it not be the family that takes responsibility for the body and determines the context for burial, not the state?

Indeed, the official handling of soldiers' bodies meant that the meaning of those deaths would increasingly be defined by the government. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered at the dedication ceremony for a military cemetery, is expressly meant to incorporate the soldier's deaths into the narrative of the nation. Lincoln declares that the soldiers' deaths serve the "new birth of freedom" that will be achieved through the triumph of the Union cause.

It is impossible now to imagine military families having to travel to Normandy, the South Pacific, Vietnam or Iraq to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones. Are there any small government activists who advocate that? It seems right that , as a current U.S. military leader declares in Burns's film, the government regards the return and honorable burial of soldiers' bodies to be a sacred duty. As a consequence of taking on this duty, however, the government also becomes a broker of the sacred.

A brilliant piece of historical retrieval, *Death and the Civil War* complicates any ideological position about the proper role of government.