

PAT TILLMAN'S SUPER BOWL

When the Arizona Cardinals take the field tomorrow, the most famous Cardinal will not be with them.

I speak, of course, of Corporal Pat Tillman, who left the NFL after 9/11 to serve in the Army Rangers. Tillman was killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004. For months after his death, he was used as a propaganda tool to glorify Bush's failed wars. The exposure of the truth behind Tillman's death has since turned him into a symbol of the duplicity of the Bush Administration, the fight for the truth, and the futility of the war itself.

Shortly after his death, the Bush Administration (already campaigning for the 04 election) pointed to his sacrifice. Karl Rove waxed, "How does our country continue to produce men and women like this." On May 1, 2004, Bush again focused on Tillman's sacrifice in a speech at the White House Correspondent's dinner.

The loss of Army Corporal Pat Tillman last week in Afghanistan brought home the sorrow that comes with every loss, and reminds us of the character of the men and women who serve on our behalf. Friends say that this young man saw the images of September the 11th, and seeing that evil, he felt called to defend America. He set aside a career in athletics and many things the world counts important: wealth and security and the acclaim of the crowds. He chose, instead, the rigors of Ranger training and the fellowship of soldiers and the hard duty in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Corporate [sic*] Tillman asked for no special attention. He was modest because he knew there were many like him, making their own sacrifices. They fill the

ranks of the Armed Forces. Every day, somewhere, they do brave and good things without notice. Their courage is usually seen only by their comrades, by those who long to be free, and by the enemy. They're willing to give up their lives, and when one is lost, a whole world of hopes and possibilities is lost with them.

This evening, we think of the families who grieve, and the families that wait on a loved one's safe return. We count ourselves lucky that this new generation of Americans is as brave and decent as any before it. (Applause.) And we honor with pride and wonder the men and women who carry the flag and the cause of the United States.

Not only did Bush invoke 9/11 in his statements in spite of DOD insistence that there was no support for such a statement, but he neglected to mention that DOD had already determined that Tillman was killed by friendly fire, a heroic but pointless sacrifice that perhaps better embodies the stupidity of Bush's wars.

As Tillman's brother Kevin testified,

April 2004 was turning into the deadliest month to date in the war in Iraq. The dual rebellions in Najaf and Fallujah handed the U.S. forces their first tactical defeat as American commanders essentially surrendered Fallujah to members of Iraq resistance, and the administration was forced to accede to Ayatollah Sistani's demand for January elections in exchange for assistance in extricating U.S. forces from its battle with the Mahdi Militia. A call-up of 20,000 additional troops was ordered, and another 20,000 troops had their tours of duty extended.

In the midst of this, the White House

learned that Christian Parenti, Seymour Hersh and other journalists were about to reveal a shocking scandal involving mass and systemic detainee abuse at the facility known as Abu Ghraib.

Then on April 22, 2004, my brother, Pat, was killed in a firefight in eastern Afghanistan. Immediately after Pat's death, our family was told that he was shot in the head by the enemy in a fierce firefight outside a narrow canyon.

In the days leading up to Pat's memorial service, media accounts based on information provided by the Army and the White House were wreathed in a patriotic glow and became more dramatic in tone. A terrible tragedy that might have further undermined support for the war in Iraq was transformed into an inspirational message that served instead to support the Nation's foreign policy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[snip]

There was one small problem with the narrative, however. It was utter fiction. The content of the multiple investigations revealed a series of contradictions that strongly suggest deliberate and careful misrepresentations.

We appeal to this committee because we believe this narrative was intended to deceive the family but more importantly to deceive the American public.

[snip]

Revealing that Pat's death was a fratricide would have been yet another political disaster during a month already swollen with political disasters and a brutal truth that the American public would undoubtedly find

unacceptable. So the facts needed to be suppressed.

An alternative narrative had to be constructed. Crucial evidence was destroyed including Pat's uniform, equipment and notebook. The autopsy was not done according to regulation, and a field hospital report was falsified.

[snip]

This freshly manufactured narrative was then distributed to the American public, and we believe the strategy had the intended effect. It shifted the focus from the grotesque torture at Abu Ghraib and a downward spiral of an illegal act of aggression to a great American who died a hero's death.

I raise Tillman today because, as his mother Mary pointed out in an interview last spring, no one has yet been held accountable for turning Tillman's death into a propaganda fiction.

And there is just—the bottom line is, no one has been held accountable for anything. There have been people that have had some slaps on the wrist for doing certain things, but—and some people have just been scapegoated.

[snip]

I would like someone to be held accountable. I'd like for them to discover and try to discover who was involved with this cover-up. It's a horrible thing that they did. And I think that if people don't see that, it's very sad, because it means that we have been numbed to all the lies and deceptions that we've been faced with during these last eight years.

Tomorrow there will be other heroes wearing red—undoubtedly Spidey Fitzgerald, maybe, if he

can elude Pittsburgh's blitzes, Kurt Warner. And, I suppose, it's appropriate that we get a fresh face like Fitzgerald to represent Arizona this year. It's a new year, a new President, there's much talk of looking forward.

But we should never forget the heroism and fight for truth that Pat Tillman and his family have come to represent.

* [Update] Yes, the transcript I linked to does say "Corporate." I checked the Internet Archive for a few days in 2004, and there was no transcript posted of the speech on Whitehouse.gov.

Update: wanted to include this from bmaz:

Earlier this morning, Marcy posted this serious and wonderful piece on Pat Tillman, and the Super Bowl he is missing. Unfortunately, it has turned somewhat, and predictably, into a knock down drag out on conspiracy theories and acts, I would like to return for a moment to the subject of her post, namely who Pat was, and what he did, which is why the answers his family seeks are so important in the first place.

First off, Pat gave up a large contract with the Cardinals to join the Army after 9/11. That is well known and part of the lore. What you should also know is that the contract offer could have been much bigger than that, but Pat was willing to take less money than he was worth on the open market to stay with the Cardinals because he believed in their redemption and he loved the community of Tempe and Phoenix. He had grown roots here from his four years at Arizona State and was determined to see the Cardinals through the transformation into a winning team. The contract he walked away from with the Cardinals was for about 3.6 million; he had turned down previously a 9 million dollar multi-year contract with the St. Louis Rams, right in the middle of their Super Bowl years, in order to stay with and build the Cardinals in what he considered to be his home at the time. That is the kind of man that Pat was.

Pat didn't give a damn about money and the trappings of celebrity. Years after already being a high paid and wealthy NFL star, you would still find Pat traversing the streets of Tempe on his bicycle, looking like a hippy with his long hair and book bag. This was literally how he would go to work every day at the Cardinals training center in South Tempe. Pat was an avid reader. Of everything. He loved politics and world events, and there was nothing he loved more than spirited discussion of the same, whether it was current events, WW II, or ancient European battles. And he could discuss all intelligently, deeply and passionately. Pat knew business and marketing as well, that was his major at ASU and he was brilliant at how he understood, and could see through, the forces at work in our economy.

Pat was an iconoclast. He was his own man and would back down from nothing, and no one, if he thought he was right. This is what made him an odd fit for the military. He had every ounce of the heroism, valor, trust and honesty that the military has always purported to stand for, and then some. But he was not a yes man and was trained, from my estimation since birth, to question authority, especially if it was malignant and wrong. I believe this may have caused a rougher ride for him in the military than most would have expected, or would suspect even now, from the outside, and almost certainly played a huge role in how his death was handled, irrespective of how his death occurred.

LabDancer spoke the word in comments:

Pat's death was caused by our side; our side covered that up, employing things our side knew were untrue; our side used that same cover to distort, turn and pervert the story of his death into a symbol aimed at promoting a falsehood: that Pat died pursuing a myth our side knew for a fact he'd personally determined beforehand to be a lie – meaning that, in end, our side rendered an obscenity from Pat's death. That's

*more than enough to earn him the status
emptywheel submits as his due.*

That is right on the money. It is also what motivated me to write this, the use of Pat is, at this point, not just by the Bush Administration for their glory, but by the contra for theirs as well. From being a player who loved football as a game, Pat has become the football in the game. That is wrong, very very wrong.

As you may surmise here, or as some may recall from discussions at The Next Hurrah long ago, I had the privilege of knowing Pat Tillman a little. I did not know him well, but well enough to get the measure of the man he was. I used to live a little less than a mile from the Cardinals headquarters and practice facility in South Tempe. On days when I worked at home, I used to ride my bicycle to a little deli, Capistrano's, between my house and the Card's facility. It was there that I met Pat, who also stopped in on his bicycle, and had a few long lunch conversations with him. He was everything he has been made out to be and more. He was twenty years younger than I, but you would never know it. He was such a deep and diverse thinker that he was almost the antithesis to the world as we currently know it.

The nation, and the world, lost a lot with Pat Tillman's death. When we talk about the type of people we need to foster and grow to lead into the future, he was a prime example. That, to me, is why his loss stings, and lingers, so deeply. Pat's family, the nation, and the world deserve the answers to what happened, it is, and remains, important. But, above and beyond all else, what people should be taking away is not the dickering over the mechanism and coverup of his death, although that is important; but more importantly, the facts and honor of his life, beliefs and hopes. Honor and fight what he stood for, and what he wanted the country to stand for, that is what he would want.

*And, as you watch the Super Bowl tomorrow,
remember Pat and his beliefs; for he, of all,
should have been around to see the day.*