The NFL, the Military, and the Hijacking of

Pat Tillman’s Story

Ryan Devereaux, September 28 2017, 6:31 a.m.

As part of his ongoing crusade targeting black athletes, President Donald Trump shared a tweet Monday morning from one of his supporters. It included an image of Pat Tillman, the former NFL safety-turned-U.S. Army Ranger who was killed in Afghanistan in the spring of 2004. “NFL player PatTillman joined U.S. Army in 2002. He was killed in action 2004. He fought 4 our country/freedom. #StandForOurAnthem #BoycottNFL,” wrote @jayMAGA45.

The intent of the president’s retweet was clear: Trump was co-signing a suggestion that Tillman was a true patriot, unlike those who have chosen to kneel during the national anthem, and that those protests dishonor his legacy.

It’s easy to understand why Tillman would make an attractive figure to Trump and his base. His Army photo reflects an image of a certain type of all-American hero: chiseled jaw, broad shoulders, white skin. But simply looking at Tillman’s photo and the superficial facts of his tale
is to miss everything important about his life, his death, and what came after. Tillman’s is indeed an all-American story, it’s just not the kind that Trump and his supporters want it to be.

Few episodes of the post-9/11 era have called down more disgrace upon the military than its handling of Tillman’s death and its treatment of his family in their search for answers. The most comprehensive documentation of those events can be found in three accounts: two books, “Boots on the Ground by Dusk: My Tribute to Pat Tillman,” written by Tillman’s mother, Mary, and “Where Men Win Glory,” by Jon Krakauer as well as a 2006 story by Gary Smith for Sports Illustrated. Together, they offer an invaluable corrective to the simplistic depictions of Tillman, revealing a complex person and charting the ways in which officials at the highest levels of U.S. government sought to capitalize off his life and death.

Cpl. Pat Tillman in a 2003 photo.
Photo: Photography Plus via Williamson, Stealth Media Solutions/AP

Tillman was 25 years old when he joined the Army, placing him on the older side of military enlistees but on the decidedly younger side of life. His decision was born out of the conclusion that his comfortable existence in the U.S. made little sense in the months after 9/11; he wanted meaning, he wanted to do something that mattered, and he wanted to continue a lifelong project of placing himself in challenging situations. Along with his brother Kevin, Tillman chose to enlist. It was the same decision thousands of other young people of his generation made in the aftermath of 9/11. Both of the Tillman boys were, by all accounts, independent-minded free thinkers who enjoyed good books and good debates — chest-pounding jocks they were not. And, like many others who chose to come to the nation’s defense following 9/11, their worldview would evolve as they saw George W. Bush’s Global War on Terrorism up close.

What set Tillman apart was what he left behind: a $3.6 million contract with the Arizona Cardinals. The ties between the U.S. military and the NFL run deep, with the Department of Defense giving millions of taxpayer dollars to the NFL in recent years for various campaigns for recruitment and to support the troops. Tillman vowed that he would do no interviews once his
enlistment became public, and he stuck to it. That did not stop the public — and the Bush administration — from seizing on his story. No matter how much he intended to stay under the radar, Tillman became a living, breathing symbol of honor, sacrifice, and the symbiotic relationship between the military and the NFL.

Tillman enlisted expecting to join the fight against Al Qaeda and the effort to bring Osama bin Laden to justice. Instead, he was sent to Iraq. All available evidence indicates that Tillman loathed the Iraq War. A voracious reader who consumed many of the world’s great religious texts even though he considered himself an atheist, Tillman was a student of history and formed his own opinions. Shortly after arriving in the country, he confided in his brother and their friend Russell Baer that he thought the invasion and occupation were “fucking illegal.” He had loose plans to meet with Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguist and antiwar intellectual Noam Chomsky once he got out of the military. Still, as much as Tillman resented the Bush administration’s war of aggression, he refused to walk away from the military until his
commitments were met, even after conversations between the NFL and the Defense Department presented an opportunity to do so.

This photo released by the U.S. Army shows former Iraqi POW Jessica Lynch receiving the Purple Heart Medal on July 21, 2003, at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington.

Photo: Sean M. Brennan/AFP/Getty Images

Early on in their deployment, Tillman and his brother were called upon to join a quick reaction force providing back-up for the rescue of Jessica Lynch. The 19-year-old private’s capture and rescue was one of the most famous and widely reported stories of the early stages of the Iraq War. It was also an egregious exercise in official lies and government propaganda. In an account fed to the Washington Post and regurgitated far and wide, the American public was told that Lynch engaged in a “fight to the death” with Iraqi forces before being overrun and thrown into the darkest depths of Iraqi captivity. While it was true that Iraqi forces ambushed the convoy Lynch was part of, and that 11 American troops lost their lives, many of the events described in the sensational account did not actually transpire. Iraqis on the ground had in fact worked, at
great personal risk, to return the young private back to the Americans once she was taken captive. And while she had indeed suffered substantial physical and emotional trauma as a result of the ordeal, Lynch herself blasted the fabrications about her experience in testimony before Congress in 2007. “I’m still confused as to why they chose to lie and try to make me a legend, when the real heroics of my fellow soldiers that day were legendary,” she said.

Tillman was right about the larger dynamics surrounding Lynch’s rescue. The pattern would repeat itself the following year — this time with him at the center.

In his journal, Tillman observed that the build-up of forces around the Lynch rescue suggested “a big Public Relations stunt.” He was right about the larger dynamics surrounding Lynch’s rescue, that the truth of what happened on the ground during the ordeal would be distorted to present the American public with a more inspiring story. He had no way of knowing, however, that the pattern would repeat itself the following year — this time with him at the center.
Tillman and his brother landed in Afghanistan on April 8, 2004. They were halfway through their commitment to the Army; the end was in sight. Then, on April 22, Tillman was killed in the province of Khost, along Afghanistan’s eastern border. The NFL player-turned-national hero was awarded the Silver Star two weeks later, and his memorial service was broadcast on national television. The military provided a Navy SEAL whom the Tillman brothers had befriended with a narrative to read to mourners. It described how Tillman charged up a ridgeline, braving enemy fire, and died defending his fellow soldiers — a fittingly heroic end for the man who had become a symbol of honor and sacrifice for a country at war. But it wasn’t quite true.

Tillman had, in fact, charged up a hill in an effort to defend the men he served with, including his brother. He was not, however, killed by the enemy. Within hours, the military knew Tillman was killed by his fellow soldiers, brought down by three bullets to the head let loose during spasms of wildly irresponsible but deliberate shooting. “I’m Pat fucking Tillman!” he had screamed, in a failed effort to stop the incoming fire. Gary Smith, in his account for Sports Illustrated, noted that, for the men on the ground, the gravity of what had happened sunk in quickly: “America’s most renowned soldier was dead, and they had killed him.”

The episode unfolded at a particularly bad moment for the Bush administration. The week before Tillman was killed, the Pentagon’s top officials learned of an upcoming “60 Minutes” story detailing torture at an American-run detention facility in Iraq called Abu Ghraib. Meanwhile, in Fallujah, the military’s campaign to take the Iraqi city from jihadis was falling apart. And, as U.S. casualties in the Iraq War hit a record high, the president’s approval rating tanked. In Tillman’s death, powerful officials saw an opportunity to spin a yarn of heroic sacrifice, rather than an obligation to tell the truth. Brig. Gen. Howard Yellen would later tell investigators that the view among the chain of command was that Tillman’s death was like a “steak dinner,” albeit delivered on a “garbage can cover.”

The military’s initial investigation, filed days after the incident, which described acts of “gross negligence” and called for the Army Criminal Investigation Command to determine whether shots were fired with “criminal intent,” was buried. In an echo of the Lynch episode, the Bush administration and the U.S. military shamelessly ran with the fabricated account of Tillman’s death. In the hours after Tillman was killed, his uniform and personal effects were destroyed, meaning key forensic evidence — of what many men in his platoon knew was a case of fratricide — was lost. Tillman’s fellow soldiers were told to keep quiet, including in their conversations with his brother Kevin, who was on the mission but at a different location when the fatal shots were fired. Right away, the military lied to Tillman’s parents, initially telling the family that an enemy combatant killed their son as he stepped out of a vehicle. The military kept the truth from them through Tillman’s memorial service, allowing the SEAL who cared for Tillman and his brother to unknowingly describe to the entire country a sequence of events with even more embellishment.
Tillman had made it clear that he did not want a military funeral. He was cremated instead. “Pat’s a fucking champion and always will be,” his baby brother Richard said at the service. “Just make no mistake, he’d want me to say this: He’s not with God. He’s fucking dead. He’s not religious. So thanks for your thoughts, but he’s fucking dead.” Lt. Col. Ralph Kauzlarich, an Army officer tapped to lead one of the early investigations into the incident, was apparently so profoundly unsettled by the Tillmans’ lack of religion that he, at one point, suggested their absence of faith was the reason they couldn’t come to terms with Pat’s death. “I’m not really sure what they believe or how they can get their head around death,” Kauzlarich told investigators in a follow-
up inquiry in 2004. “So, in my personal opinion, sir, that is why I don’t think they’ll ever be satisfied.”

Four weeks after the memorial service, Kevin Tillman’s sergeant pulled him aside at their stateside base and told him his brother had been killed by friendly fire. Their mother, Mary, got the news from a reporter calling her for comment. The military withheld key facts from the Tillman family even as it admitted the broad stokes of his death. It would take four years of digging, led chiefly by Mary; seven official investigations; and two congressional hearings before some semblance of the truth surrounding Tillman’s death was pried from the government. More than 2,000 pages of testimony released to the Associated Press in 2007 revealed that “Army attorneys sent each other congratulatory emails for keeping criminal investigators at bay,” and that the close proximity of the bullet holes in Tillman’s forehead had raised serious questions from medical examiners as to the Army’s version of events. “An alternative narrative had to be constructed,” Kevin Tillman told lawmakers in a hearing that year — the same hearing where Jessica Lynch described how the government twisted her experience for its own benefit. “After the truth of Pat’s death was partially revealed,” Tillman’s brother said before the House committee, “Pat was no longer of use as a sales asset and became strictly the Army’s problem.”

Working tirelessly for years in the evenings, Mary Tillman pieced together what happened to her son. “They were now left with the task of briefing our family and answering our questions,” Kevin went on to say. “With any luck, our family would sink quietly into our grief, and the whole unsavory episode would be swept under the rug. However, they miscalculated our family’s reaction. Through the amazing strength and perseverance of my mother, the most amazing woman on earth, our family has managed to have multiple investigations conducted. However, while each investigation gathered more information, the mountain of evidence was never used to arrive at an honest or even sensible conclusion.” Working tirelessly for years in the evenings, after coming home from her job as a special education teacher, Mary Tillman pieced together what happened to her son, pouring the shocking findings into her book. “They attached themselves to his virtue and then threw him under the bus,” she told Sports Illustrated. “They had no regard for him as a person. He’d hate to be used for a lie. I don’t care if they put a bullet through my head in the middle of the night. I’m not stopping.”

Tillman’s mother laid much of the blame for the cover-up at the feet of Donald Rumsfeld, Bush’s secretary of defense at the time. Rumsfeld had taken an early interest in the compelling story of the young football star who became an Army Ranger. In a 2008 interview with Amy Goodman of Democracy Now!, Mary explained that Rumsfeld “had written Pat a letter when he enlisted, thanking him for enlisting, so Pat was in his radar.” Tillman said it was “ludicrous to think” that Rumsfeld, a well-known micromanager with a keen interest in special operations units, wouldn’t have been immediately notified of her son’s fratricide. “Heads would have rolled if they didn’t tell Rumsfeld,” she said.

“I don’t recall when I was told and I don’t recall who told me,” Rumsfeld had said of the episode before Congress in 2007. “I know that I would not engage in a cover-up.”
Rumsfeld wasn’t the only senior Pentagon figure involved in the events following Tillman’s death. At the time, the now-retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal headed the famed Joint Special Operations Command, running the most secretive Pentagon’s efforts in Afghanistan — including Tillman’s Army Rangers platoon. Seven days after Tillman was killed, amid the mounting evidence of fratricide, McChrystal sent a memo up the chain of command as a heads-up to the president and other senior officials who might make speeches about the incident.

“I felt it was essential you receive this information as soon as we detected it,” McChrystal wrote, “in order to preclude any unknowing statements by our country’s leaders which might cause public embarrassment if the circumstances of Corporal Tillman’s death become public.”

The “if” at the end of the general’s statement was particularly concerning to the Tillman family, in part because subsequent investigations revealed that McChrystal was well-aware of the fact
that Tillman’s death was a case of fratricide when he sent the memo. Krakauer, in his book, described McChrystal going to “extraordinary lengths to prevent the Tillman family from learning the truth about how Pat died.” Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2009, McChrystal told lawmakers, “We failed the family.” He added, “It was not intentional.”

In the wake of his death, Tillman’s wife and high school sweetheart, Marie, set up a foundation in his name — the Pat Tillman Foundation — to support veterans and their spouses with academic scholarships. On Monday, she issued a statement about the president’s invocation of her late husband’s name. “Pat’s service, along with that of every man and woman’s service, should never be politicized in a way that divides us,” she wrote. “The very action of self-expression and the freedom to speak from one’s heart — no matter those views — is what Pat and so many other Americans have given their lives for. Even if they didn’t always agree with those views.” Marie’s statement went on: “It is my sincere hope that our leaders both understand and learn from the lessons of Pat’s life and death, and also those of so many other brave Americans.”

There is an irony in suggesting Tillman’s legacy is somehow desecrated by protests that take place during the national anthem because those protests are said to insult the military, when it was that same military, the NFL’s longtime ally, that did so much actual damage to Tillman’s legacy after his death. There has been no shortage of commentary on what Tillman would or would not do in the current moment. During his time as a football player, he both stood outside his teammates’ traditional pre-game prayer circles — a reflection of his deeply held atheism — and also described, in no uncertain terms, his reverence for the symbolism of the flag. Whatever action he would take, there’s every reason to believe that Tillman would follow his heart and his convictions if faced with the protests rippling through the sports world right now. Unfortunately, the public will never know for sure, because Tillman died on a hill in Afghanistan 13 years ago, in war that continues to this day.

He was 27 years old.
Arizona State Sun Devils players run past the Pat Tillman statue before a college football game on Sept. 23, 2017, in Tempe, Ariz. Photo: Christian Petersen/Getty Images