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## Who Killed Pat Tillman?

by **Michael I. Niman**

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The American mass media are like tired old dogs, dutifully fetching official lies on command and dropping them like bones at the feet of an unsuspecting public. We in turn reward them by buying both the products and the myths they sell us. Eventually, however, the products fail and the myths unravel. When the government's popularity wanes sufficiently, despite the support of a compliant press, even old dogs can come up with new tricks, reviving the lost art of investigative reporting.

Take the Pat Tillman story. Remember him? He was the star National Football League defensive back who, after the 9/11 attacks, walked away from his \$3.6 million contract with the Arizona Cardinals to enlist as an elite U.S. Army Ranger and go off to Afghanistan to whip some terrorist ass. No matter what your opinion on the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, or your theory on who was ultimately responsible for the 9/11 attacks, Tillman was clearly acting as a selfless hero in the traditional sense of the word. The media sang only one song at the time—dirtbags in Afghanistan did this to us—and "deterrence" through violent retribution was the only discussable response. Both Tillman and his brother Kevin, like most every American, bought into the program—but they actually volunteered to fight.

After joining up, however, they weren't shipped off to Afghanistan, where they believed terrorists were holed up, but to Iraq to fight in a newly minted war that didn't exist when they signed away control of their lives. Here's where the recruiting poster image deviated from the script. There was a lot more depth to Tillman, who was pursuing a master's degree in history, than one would normally expect of an NFL gladiator. Afghanistan had been an easier sell, but Tillman would never buy the official line on Iraq. At one point, according to a San Francisco Chronicle article published nearly a year and half after his death, he told fellow Rangers fighting in Iraq that the war was, "so fucking illegal." A close friend told the paper, "That's who he was—he totally was against Bush." Tillman's mother clarified, explaining that her son believed the Afghanistan war was justified by the September 11th attacks but "Pat was very critical of the whole Iraq War." Another friend,

who served with him, recalled how Tillman admonished fellow Rangers to vote Bush out of office in the forthcoming presidential election.

### **The Chomsky Factor**

Tillman, we now know, was also in contact with one of his favorite authors, America's leading intellectual dissident, Noam Chomsky. According to the Chronicle, Tillman had set up a meeting with Chomsky to take place when he returned from Afghanistan, where he eventually wound up after serving his tour in Iraq.

This image of a Chomsky-loving, anti-Bush, anti-Iraq-war hero (at a time when most of the U.S. population supported the administration's foreign policy), flew in the face of the official Bush administration portrait of Tillman, painted by dutiful media whores like Ann Coulter, who once described him in near-racialist terms as "An American original-virtuous, pure and masculine, like only an American can be." (Max Blumenthal, blogging for the online Huffington Post, asked if we could have Coulter's line in the original German).

As both wars droned on, Tillman, the picture perfect poster boy, evolved into something of a wild card. With a Chomsky meeting on the horizon there existed a very real possibility that Tillman, in the weeks leading up to the 2004 presidential election, might go public with his anti-war, anti-Bush views, dealing a critical blow to the very foundation of the Bush administration's propaganda pyramid. That day never came, however. On April 22, 2004, Tillman was killed while on patrol in Afghanistan by three American bullets to the head.

### **Jessica Lynch Redux**

Immediately, evidence surrounding the killing began to disappear. One day after his death someone burned his body armor. Two days later someone burned his uniform. At some point his journal, which he religiously wrote in, went missing. With that journal disappeared Tillman's voice.

Meanwhile the Bush administration's professional liars began spinning one of their tallest tales, with their cohorts in the Pentagon explaining how the hero Tillman was killed by enemy fire. Bush himself chimed in to announce that Tillman was "an inspiration on and off the football field, as with all who made the ultimate sacrifice in the war on terror." The Pentagon, as it did with the Jessica Lynch story, spewed forth so many lies as to bury itself under an obvious pile of bullshit. The Army issued Tillman a postmortem Silver Star for bravery, explaining in the process how, "through the firing Tillman's voice was heard issuing fire commands to take the fight to the enemy on the dominating hill ground." And this is the story the media reported to the world.

### **Reports of Fratricide**

But files obtained by Tillman's mother, from three Army investigations into the killing, document a different set of last words. According to testimony issued by a fellow Ranger, who was at Tillman's side when he was killed, the last words Tillman shouted before being shot were, "Cease fire, friendlies, I am Pat Fucking Tillman, dammit!"

According to the San Francisco Chronicle, Ranger commanders received a report the day after his death stating that Tillman died in a suspected act of fratricide, the crime of killing members of your own group. But the more they were confronted with the truth of what happened, the harder Army officials stuck to the official lies. One week after his death they pulled the Silver Star move, successfully milking the hero dying in action myth in a compliant media environment. Two weeks after his death the Army's official casualty report stated that he was killed by enemy forces. Six weeks later, however, with the mythic version of Tillman's killing firmly embedded in the American conscious, and with the Tillman story safely buried in the ashbin of "old news," the Army finally told Tillman's family that the official cause of death was "fratricide."

By all accounts, Tillman was popular and loved by the troops with whom he served-supporting the theory that his death was in fact a tragic accident. One of the Army investigations, however, suggested leveling charges of criminal intent against the killer or killers, prompting Tillman's mother to ask, "I want to know what kind of criminal intent there was." But all she has been able to glean from over 2,000 pages of official reports are contradictions, continuously changing stories, and countless blacked out lines.

### **Putting It All Together**

What we have with the Tillman case is a cover-up and a fabrication. What was covered up was the embarrassing reality surrounding the futility of his death-the wasting of an iconic American hero. What was fabricated was a fairy tale story of a heroic battle, one that would support the Bush administration's global war effort while not undermining its military recruiting. What was deliberately ignored was an incident at his funeral-reported in the May 4, 2004, San Francisco Chronicle and New York Daily News-when Tillman's youngest brother, Rich, took offense at words that Tillman was now "with God"; he stated to the gathering, "Pat isn't with God. He's fucking dead. He wasn't religious." More importantly, what was buried was the complex story of Pat Tillman's opposition to the Iraq war and the Bush agenda. Murdered in this fabrication and cover-up, therefore, was the real Pat Tillman. According to his father, "The administration clearly was using this case for its own political reasons. This cover-up started within minutes of Pat's death, and it started at high levels."

Only now, as a flood of public opinion is forcing the media to report critically about the Bush administration, will we possibly see a real investigation into how Pat Tillman died. And if we are persistent enough we might even see a proper investigation into why Tillman, and thousands of

other Americans, and tens of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans, had to give up their lives.

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