Pat Tillman's brother denounces the US military's "deliberate and calculated lies"

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In impassioned testimony before the House Oversight and Government Reform committee in Washington Tuesday, Kevin Tillman accused the US military and the Bush administration of "deliberate and calculated lies" in regard to his brother's death by friendly fire in Afghanistan in 2004.

Pat Tillman, a college and professional football star, joined the military after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, walking away from a multimillion-dollar contract in the National Football League. His death on April 22, 2004 became the occasion for an outburst of flag-waving by the American government and media. Tillman was proclaimed a role model of courage and patriotism.

The White House, in its statement at the time, declared, "Pat Tillman was an inspiration on and off the football field, as with all who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the war on terror. His family is in the thoughts and prayers of President and Mrs. Bush."

In fact, the US military concocted a story about Tillman's death at the hands of the enemy when it knew within days that he had been killed by his own comrades. Tillman was posthumously awarded the Silver Star, the second highest US military decoration for valor, even though those involved in the awarding were aware that the "heroic" version of his death was a fraud.

In his statement Tuesday, Kevin Tillman, who appeared alongside his mother Mary, offered a cogent political explanation for the military's actions. He first noted that while his brother's death had been a devastating loss for family and friends, "to others within the government, it appears to have been an opportunity."

April 2004, he continued, was turning "into the deadliest month to date in the war in Iraq The dual rebellions in Najaf and Fallujah handed the US 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 US forces from its battle with the Mahdi militia."

Twenty thousand more US troops were called up and another 20,000 had their tours of duty extended. In the midst of all this, the White House learned that journalists "were about to reveal a shocking scandal involving massive and systemic detainee abuse in a facility known as Abu Ghraib."

Kevin Tillman, also a former US Army ranger, who was in a convoy behind his older brother's at the time of the latter's death, bitingly explained that in the days leading up to Pat's nationally televised memorial service on May 3, "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. To further exploit Pat's death, he was awarded the Silver Star for valor."

Tillman read from the account of his older brother's end provided by the Pentagon. It included passages like this: "Above the din of battle, Corporal Tillman was heard issuing fire commands to take the fight to an enemy on the dominating high ground. Always leading from the front, Corporal Tillman aggressively maneuvered his team against the enemy position on a steep slope... in the face of mortal danger, Corporal Tillman illustrated that he would not fail his comrades. His actions are in keeping with the highest standards of the United States army."

Kevin Tillman went on, "There was one small problem with the narrative, however: It was utter fiction. The content of the multiple investigations reveal 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."

After explaining the actual, disturbing details of Pat Tillman's death—as a result of ineptitude, carelessness and "uncontrolled shooting" by American forces—his brother noted that revealing the true circumstances "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." In fact, Tillman was shot dead and most of his head blown off by fellow American soldiers only 35 meters away, after he had persistently waved at them indicating he was one of their number. "So the facts needed to be suppressed. An alternative narrative had to be constructed."

Evidence was destroyed, including Tillman's uniform, equipment and notebook. "The autopsy was not done according to regulation and the field hospital report was falsified." An initial investigation completed within a week and a half, "which hit disturbingly close to the mark, disappeared into thin air and was conveniently replaced by another investigation with more palatable findings."

In late May 2004 the army acknowledged that Tillman "probably died of fratricide." Kevin Tillman commented Tuesday, "After the truth of Pat's death was partially revealed, Pat was no longer of use as a sales asset, and became strictly the Army's problem. They were now left with the task of briefing our family and answering our questions. With any luck, our family would sink quietly into our grief and the whole unsavory episode would be swept under the rug."

The family, however, has persisted. Tillman poured scorn on the most recent department of defense report, released in March, which concluded that his brother's death in Afghanistan was an "accident"

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and that its handling by the military was a compilation of "missteps, inaccuracies and errors in judgment."

Refuting this, Tillman described the shooting as "a clear violation of the rules of engagement" and the cover-up of the death as composed of "intentional falsehoods that meet the definition of fraud" and "deliberate acts of deceit."

Kevin Tillman also noted that his brother's had not been the only case "where battlefield realities reach the family and the public in the form of a false narrative." He recounted a number of similar stories involving official lies or unanswered questions about soldiers' deaths.

Finally, he explained that the Tillman family has concluded "that our efforts are being actively thwarted by powers that are more interested in protecting a narrative than getting at the truth or seeing that justice is served... Pat's death at the hands of his comrades is a terrible tragedy. But the fact that the army, and what appears to be others, attempted to hijack his virtue and his legacy is simply horrific. The least this country can do for him in return is to uncover who was responsible for his death, who lied and covered it up, and who instigated those lies and benefited from them; then ensure that justice is meted out to the culpable."

Under questioning by committee members, Tillman expressed himself "confident" that elected or appointed officials had colluded in the campaign of lies, including former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. He remarked, "It's a bit disingenuous to think that the administration did not know about what was going on, something so politically sensitive." Mary Tillman also pointed specifically to the role of Rumsfeld. She observed that based on her study of the man and his methods of work, she found it nearly inconceivable that he was not in the loop. "The fact that he [her son] would have died by friendly fire and no one told Rumsfeld is ludicrous," she told the committee.

The House committee did release some new information, suggesting the complicity of the administration in the cover-up. It has come to light that the military's special operations sent a high-priority memo, a "P4," to three generals, including Gen. John Abizaid, then-chief of the US Central Command, warning them that "friendly fire" had caused Tillman's death. A witness Tuesday, Thomas Gimble, the defense department's inspector general, claimed, "We think the P4 stopped with the three generals," and never reached Rumsfeld or the White House.

Committee chairman Rep. Henry Waxman, Democrat from California, asked Gimble, "How is that believable that three generals would not send this up the chain of command?" Gimble replied, "I can't explain why."

Other Democratic members pointed out, based on material released by the Pentagon, that two White House speechwriters requested information on the manner of Tillman's demise, obviously intending to use the material for inspirational purposes, within a week of April 22. Yet when Bush spoke on April 29, while praising the dead Army ranger, the president carefully avoided mentioning how he had died. It seems plausible that he only did so because top officials already knew the truth. Rumsfeld and Bush claim to have only learned the true facts weeks later, following the phony memorial service and after Tillman's death had helped divert attention from the growing disaster in Iraq.

Asked about this by the media Tuesday, White House deputy press secretary Dana Perrino said, "It's not clear—people don't remember—if he [Bush] heard it from media reports, or if he heard it from the Pentagon, but it was some time after the funeral."

Army Specialist Bryan O'Neal, who was with Tillman when he was killed, testified before the House committee Tuesday that he had been ordered to lie about the events to the dead man's brother. O'Neal explained that when he got a chance to talk to Kevin Tillman, "I was ordered not to tell him what happened." He said he was "quite appalled" by the orders, which came from Lt. Col. Jeff Bailey, the battalion commander, who also "made it known" to O'Neal that he "would get in trouble" if he told Kevin the truth.

Former army private Jessica Lynch also appeared at the hearing. Lynch was badly injured when her army convoy came under attack in Iraq in 2003. After her evacuation from an Iraqi hospital by American forces, stories were invented about her heroism by the same propaganda machine.

On April 3, 2003, for example, a story in the *Washington Post* declared, "Pfc. Jessica Lynch, rescued Tuesday from an Iraqi hospital, fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after Iraqi forces ambushed the Army's 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company, firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition, US officials said yesterday."

Again, little of this was true. Lynch never fired a weapon and her wounds resulted from a rocket striking the truck she was driving. She told the committee Tuesday about the aftermath of her experience in Iraq, "Tales of great heroism were being told." Her parents' home in West Virginia had come under siege from the media "all repeating the story of the little girl Rambo from the hills who went down fighting. It was not true." She added later, "The bottom line is, the American people are capable of determining their own ideals for heroes, and they don't need to be told elaborate lies."

Republican attendance at the hearing Tuesday was sparse and Republican members asked few questions. Waxman and the Democrats took the opportunity to grandstand as defenders of the truth. However, despite the fact—or perhaps precisely because of it—that these were episodes in which the army high command came off so miserably, the Democrats felt obliged to solidarize themselves with the military at every opportunity.

Indeed Waxman opened his prepared remarks by observing, "I'll start this morning by stating what I think is already obvious: every one of my colleagues—Democratic and Republican—genuinely supports our troops. We are all deeply grateful for the sacrifices so many men and women have made voluntarily to defend our country and our freedoms."

He was echoed by other Democratic House members who hailed the "fight for freedom" in Iraq and Afghanistan and the courage of those "who put themselves in harm's way."

The outraged yet articulate comments of Kevin and Mary Tillman in particular spoke to a very different sentiment: the growing hostility of wide layers of the population to the entire political and military apparatus.

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