

Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld claims no cover-up in Pat Tillman death

Andre Damon
2 August 2007

Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld testified Wednesday before a congressional investigation into the fratricidal shooting of professional football player turned soldier Pat Tillman. Rumsfeld claimed that there was no cover-up within the military over Tillman's death, a position that flies in the face of evidence that has emerged over the past three years.

Tillman joined the military after September 11, 2001, leaving a career in the National Football League. When he was killed in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004, the incident was used as a propaganda tool by the US government. The Pentagon immediately suppressed soldiers' reports acknowledging that Tillman had been killed by friendly fire, and told the media that he had died while attempting to storm Afghan positions. This was followed by weeks of triumphant coverage in the media.

Tillman was lauded as a hero who had "given his life for his country." It emerged later, however, that the story given of his death was fabricated, and that he was not killed by Afghan insurgents. These facts were withheld from his family and the American public.

On Tuesday, the US Army issued a report declaring, "In seven investigations into this tragedy, not one has found evidence of a conspiracy by the Army to fabricate a hero, deceive the public, or mislead the Tillman Family about the circumstances of Cpl. Tillman's death."

These claims are contradicted by the findings of the previous House Oversight and Government Reform Committee investigation held in April, in which committee chairman Henry Waxman concluded that "evidence was destroyed" and "witness statements were doctored."

Testifying before the same House committee Wednesday, Rumsfeld claimed that he "did not recall" when he was informed of the circumstances surrounding Tillman's death, but said it was around May 20, 2004—about a month after Tillman was killed and six days

after his family was told. Rumsfeld denied having anything to do with the story given by the Pentagon.

In addition to Rumsfeld, two top generals—John Abizaid and Richard Myers—testified before the committee. Both of them denied any conscious wrongdoing in the affair. Thus far, it appears that Lieutenant General Philip Kensinger has been singled out to take the blame for the entire incident. On Tuesday he was censured and may be demoted after an Army report declared he had not notified the Tillman family about the possibility that Tillman had been killed by friendly fire.

"Lieutenant General Kensinger deceived investigators about what he knew and when he knew it," said Army Secretary Pete Geren, who recommended Kensinger's demotion. "He made false official statements." Although a subpoena was issued for Kensinger to appear before Wednesday's committee hearing, Waxman said Kensinger did not reply to the summons and could not be found. In the course of previous investigations, Kensinger told investigators on at least 70 occasions that he could not recall the details of previous events.

Mary Tillman, Pat's mother, said of the Army investigation released earlier this week, "It's so humiliating and disrespectful. It's one more example of the Army investigating itself," she told the New York Daily News. "It was all done to glorify this war. It's a sham. Pat deserves the truth." The Tillman family has repeatedly insisted that Rumsfeld and other high-ranking military and political officials participated in the cover up.

It would indeed have been highly unlikely for the Rumsfeld, a notorious micromanager, to have been unaware of the circumstances surrounding Tillman's death. The coordination of media fanfare and the Pentagon's rapid generation of a fake story, which served as the basis for awarding Tillman medals and posthumous promotion, would have required high-level oversight.

The committee noted that Rumsfeld himself sent a

memo to Tillman early on, congratulating him on joining the Army Rangers. Rumsfeld sent another memo to a subordinate, instructing him to “keep an eye on” Tillman. Under these circumstances, Rumsfeld’s claims that he was oblivious to the circumstances surrounding Tillman’s death are highly dubious.

When President Bush spoke on Tillman’s death at the end of April 2004, he avoided speaking about how Tillman died—a clear indication that the White House already knew the truth only a week after the incident took place, but several weeks before Tillman’s family was informed that friendly fire was involved.

Earlier this month, the White House refused to turn over documents requested by the oversight committee, claiming executive privilege. The Bush administration has taken the position that any communication or documents involving the executive branch can be kept secret on the grounds of executive privilege—an extraordinary and unconstitutional assertion of Presidential power. Representatives Waxman and Thomas Davis (the ranking Republican on the committee) sent letters of protest to the White House and Pentagon, but did nothing else.

In his opening report yesterday, Waxman stated, “We have tried to find out what the White House knew about Corporal Tillman’s death. We know that in the days following the initial report, at least 97 White House officials sent and received hundreds of e-mails about Corporal Tillman’s death and how the White House and the President should respond.”

Waxman continued: “weeks later—in the days before and after the Defense Department announced that Corporal Tillman was actually killed by our own forces—there are no e-mails from any of these 97 White House officials about how Corporal Tillman really died.” Waxman concluded, “No one will tell us when and how the White House learned the truth.”

The investigation comes in the wake of new evidence suggesting that Tillman may have been killed intentionally. According to documents obtained by the Associated Press, the doctor who performed Tillman’s autopsy sought to initiate a criminal investigation into the his death, but was turned away by both the Army’s Human Resources Command and the Criminal Investigation Division.

The doctor concluded that Tillman had been shot in the forehead by three bullets from an M-16 at about 10 yards away, although the nearest eyewitness continues to claim that the shooter was farther away. Tillman was shot after setting off several smoke grenades and while waving his

hands and yelling for the soldiers to stop shooting. The documents also note that no evidence of fire from Afghan insurgents was discovered at the scene of Tillman’s death, and that no equipment or personnel were struck.

Tillman was reportedly an opponent of the war in Iraq. He was an avid reader of radical historian and linguist Noam Chomsky, whom he had contacted and was planning to meet after his return from active duty. After Tillman’s death, his clothes were removed and burned, and his personal possessions, including a daily journal, mysteriously disappeared.

Bryan O’Neal, who had been next to Tillman when the latter was killed, was told by his commanding officer not to inform anyone of the circumstances of his death, especially Tillman’s brother, Kevin.

O’Neal told the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee in April that his commanding officer told him, “Do not let Kevin know, that he’s probably in a bad place knowing his brother’s dead.” Kevin Tillman was also an Army Ranger at the time, and was in a convoy behind his brother when Pat Tillman was killed. O’Neal was asked to describe the moment of Tillman’s death for the latter’s posthumous commendations. He testified that his statements were later doctored and that erroneous claims about Afghan fire somehow made their way into the final draft.

Tillman’s death came at a time when the US government and military were trying to reestablish their credibility after the publication of photos from Abu Ghraib and a string of setbacks in Afghanistan. “Revealing that Pat’s death was a fratricide would have been yet another political disaster during a month already swollen with disasters,” Kevin Tillman told the house oversight committee in April. He accused the Bush administration of “deliberate and calculated lies” in the case.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact