

Mary Tillman denounces cover-up of son's "friendly fire" killing in Afghanistan

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Mary Tillman, the mother of former professional football player Patrick Tillman, denounced the continued cover-up and whitewash of her son's "friendly fire" killing in Afghanistan. She spoke in Birmingham, Michigan last week as part of the promotion for her new book, *Boots on the Ground by Dusk: My Tribute to Pat Tillman*.

Tillman read a section of her book and discussed the death of her son and its aftermath. Pat Tillman was killed on April 22, 2004. Though officials within the military and Bush administration were soon aware that the death came at the hands of US soldiers, this fact was covered up for weeks. Pat Tillman's death was exploited in an attempt to bolster support for US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"This deception was not just a deception of our family; it was a public deception used to rally the public behind the war," Tillman said. "Pat would have been horrified that his life and death had been used in this way." Mrs. Tillman said she had been disappointed by the reaction from both the Democratic and Republican Parties.

At the event, Tillman spoke about the history of her family, including her relationship with her own father, who was in the military. She discussed her opposition to the war in Vietnam and the first war against Iraq, in 1991.

Since the death of her son, Tillman has become vocal in demanding an investigation into those responsible for attempting to cover up the nature of his death. She has come to express a politicization among many of the families that have been directly impacted by the war, and she sees herself as a representative of those families that do not have as much public exposure.

Tillman recounted how her son supported the US war in Afghanistan and joined the military after the

September 11 attacks, accepting the US government's rationale for the war. She said, however, that he was always concerned that his decision to fight in the military would be exploited by the government. Both of her sons, Patrick and Kevin, were disturbed by the war in Iraq, which they saw as a distraction from the "war on terrorism."

Mrs. Tillman said that while individuals in the military expect that they may be killed, "What they don't expect is that the government and the military could treat them with such disrespect by lying to their families and exploiting their deaths."

A 2005 report prepared by Brigadier General Gary Jones revealed that several senior military commanders, including General John Abizaid, knew of the real cause of Tillman's death within days of the incident. At the time, Abizaid was head of US Central Command, which oversees military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Reports that he was killed in a life-and-death battle with Taliban fighters were nevertheless propagated for weeks, and Tillman was awarded a Silver Star and Purple Heart posthumously. Tillman's family was not informed of the real circumstances of his death until May 28, 2004.

Tillman insisted that there had been a cover-up of the real cause of Tillman's death, and that the misreporting could not be attributed to mistakes or lack of information. The family last year released a statement describing the military's conduct as "criminal negligence, professional misconduct, battlefield incompetence, concealment and destruction of evidence, deliberate deception, and conspiracy to deceive."

"Pat's death to them was a good thing," she said. "It was something that they could use to distract from all

the bad things that were going on in Iraq at the time.” She pointed in particular to the growth of resistance in Iraq and to the Abu Ghraib torture photos, which were first released to the public a week after Tillman’s death.

“[Then-Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld in particular knew that it was friendly fire,” she said, noting that he had been following Tillman personally because of his high public profile. “The idea that he wouldn’t have been told is ridiculous. They were following Pat’s situation closely. They were aware of what happened, and within 24 hours they knew it was a suspected fratricide.”

Mrs. Tillman also noted that the case of Pat Tillman was not unique, and that there were several other less well-known incidents of friendly-fire deaths that had been presented as combat fatalities. She also pointed to the case of Private Jessica Lynch, whose rescue in 2003 was staged in order to better serve as propaganda for the military and the war.

In March 2007, the Pentagon released its official report on the incident, which found that the death of Tillman had come at the hands of US soldiers. The Tillman family has denounced this report as a whitewash of the government and military cover-up. The report insisted that the death was an accident, though doctors who initially performed the autopsy on Tillman suspected that he may have been deliberately killed.

During a question and answer period following her remarks, this reporter asked Mrs. Tillman what reaction she had received from within the political establishment to her demands for an investigation, and, in particular, whether she had been satisfied with the response of the Democrats since they gained control of Congress in January 2007

“No, I have not been satisfied at all,” she replied. “There was a period during the beginning when they had made gestures toward an investigation, but they have made no effort to find out who is responsible. Members of both parties are guilty of a lack of integrity and courage.”

She noted that there was a hearing before the House Oversight and Government reform Committee, chaired by Democrat Henry Waxman this past August, but that it had come to nothing.

“At the hearings, they did not ask the generals

involved the tough questions about their knowledge in the cover-up. They were clearly lying in these hearings.” She cited, in particular, the testimony of Abizaid.

“Abizaid said he was in Iraq at a time when he was, in fact, in Afghanistan talking to Tillman’s commander. Why was he there and why did he lie about it?”



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