

US football player targeted for criticizing celebration of Bin Laden killing

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Following the assassination of Osama bin Laden, the news media and virtually every avenue of American popular culture was activated to manufacture an atmosphere of jingoism and celebration over the dirty killing of the Al Qaeda leader.

As has so often been the case, in particular since September 11, 2001, professional sports has been used to create a false aura of “national unity” and intimidate anyone critical of the criminal actions of the US government.

The backward chants of “USA! USA!” by a section of the crowd at the Philadelphia Phillies vs. the New York Mets baseball game Sunday night—following the announcement of the bin Laden killing—was followed by a week of sporting events where soldiers threw out the ceremonial first pitches and the routine singing of the national anthem at the National Basketball playoffs became the occasion for even more crude displays of flag-waving patriotism and militarism.

Sportscasters from the ESPN cable network were immediately dispatched to solicit pro-government comments from prominent athletes in an effort to demonstrate the supposed unanimity of public opinion. In an interview with Minnesota Vikings football coach Mike Priefer, a former Navy helicopter pilot, ESPN commentator Jay Crawford urged the coach that defensive players who tackle ball carriers on kickoff returns were a “well-trained team, working in precision,” just like the Navy Seal assassination squad.

Whether they shared the right-wing political conceptions or were naïve and taken in by the propaganda blitz, several prominent athletes issued statements praising the military and President Obama. There were, however, notable and, in the present circumstances, courageous exceptions. Since sports cable channels and news media would not broadcast

such statements, the athletes making criticisms used their Twitter accounts.

The day after Obama’s announcement of the killing, Rashard Mendenhall, the 23-year-old star running back for the Pittsburgh Steelers football team, tweeted: “What kind of man celebrates death? It’s amazing how people can HATE a man they have never even heard speak. We’ve only heard one side.”

Mendenhall’s comments—which were bound up with his religious convictions and skepticism in the government’s version of the 9/11 events—were immediately seized upon for a rabid campaign accusing the football player of being disloyal and contemptuous of the 3,000 Americans killed by the terrorist attacks. The fraternity of cable television sportscasters—who, with few exceptions, generally appeal only to the base instincts of sports fans—demanded that the National Football League block athletes from having access to Twitter and social networking sites.

On Tuesday, Pittsburgh Steelers President Art Rooney II released a statement regarding Mendenhall, saying it “is hard to explain or even comprehend what he meant with his recent Twitter comments.” He added, “The entire Steelers organization is very proud of the job our military personnel have done.”

In the face of the torrent of criticism, Mendenhall issued a clarification on his blog, which, while expressing religious conceptions and some conciliation to pro-war propaganda, nevertheless upheld his initial comments and the right to the express them.

“This controversial statement was something I said in response to the amount of joy I saw in the event of a murder. I don’t believe that this is an issue of politics or American pride; but one of religion, morality, and human ethics. I wasn’t questioning Bin Laden’s evil acts. I believe that he will have to face God for what he

has done. I was reflecting on our own hypocrisy. During 9/11 we watched in horror as parts of the world celebrated death on our soil. Earlier this week, parts of the world watched us in horror celebrating a man's death."

On Friday, sports apparel maker Champion fired Mendenhall, who recently signed a four-year contract and had been a sponsor with the company since his NFL career started in 2008. While hypocritically claiming to respect his right to express such views, the company said, "We no longer believe that Mr. Mendenhall can appropriately represent Champion and we have notified Mr. Mendenhall that we are ending our business relationship."

The statement added, "Champion is a strong supporter of the government's efforts to fight terrorism and is very appreciative of the dedication and commitment of the US Armed Forces" and said Mendenhall's comments and opinions "were inconsistent with the values of the Champion brand."

Despite the witch-hunt atmosphere, other athletes also spoke out. Milwaukee Bucks basketball player Chris Douglas-Roberts tweeted after hearing of Bin Laden's death, "Is this a celebration??"

Responding to several hostile tweets he went on to express his anti-war position in regards to the killing of bin Laden.

"It took 919,967 deaths to kill that one guy.

"It took 10 years & 2 Wars to kill that...guy.

"It cost us (USA) roughly \$1,188,263,000,000 to kill that.....guy. But we're winning though. Haaaa. (Sarcasm)."

With more negative reaction being tweeted at Douglas-Roberts, he went on to clarify his position.

"What I'm sayin' has nothing to do with 9/11 or that guy (Bin Laden). I still feel bad for the 9/11 families but I feel EQUALLY bad for the war families. ...

"People are telling me to get out of America now b/c I'm against MORE INNOCENT people dying every day? B/c I'm against a 10-year WAR?

"Whatever happened to our freedom of speech? That's the problem. We don't want to hear anything that isn't our perspective."

The effort to stampede public opinion, of course, has an effect. But the overwhelming sentiment of the population is one of suspicion towards the government and its official explanations and a concern over the

erosion of deeply felt democratic rights in the name of the "war on terrorism."

The American population—including athletes—have had ample experience with the lies of the US government and their exploitation of 9/11. Eight months after the terrorist attacks, Arizona Cardinal football player Patrick Tillman left a lucrative career to join the military. His death in Afghanistan, near the Pakistan border, was used by the Bush administration and Pentagon to promote support for the war, even as they concealed the fact from the American public and his family that he had been killed by friendly fire from US troops.

In 2007 testimony before a US congressional hearing, Tillman's brother Kevin Tillman testified: "The deception surrounding this case was an insult to the family: but more importantly, its primary purpose was to deceive a whole nation. We say these things with disappointment and sadness for our country. Once again, we have been used as props in a Pentagon public relations exercise."

While the military presented Tillman as a pro-war sports icon, his family and friends later made public that the young man developed anti-war and left-wing views while in the military and was preparing to write an anti-war book when he returned from Afghanistan.



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