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The death of Pat Tillman

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The death of Pat Tillman
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Over the past few weeks, the world of sport has been touched by the world of politics in a number of ways. Politics and sport are often mixed and when they are, the results can be at once unfortunate, distressing, and sometimes appalling. Certainly, the House of Representatives' hearings on steroids come to mind in this context.

More distressing, however, is the case of Pat Tillman, the circumstances surrounding his death, and the various ways in which his death was exploited by the agencies and agents of the nation. The cynicism which this expresses about the dignity of human life and the solemnity of devotion to nation is deeply disturbing. Public patriotism has been undressed and what is revealed is considerably worse than the emperor's nakedness.

Pat Tillman played his college football at Arizona State University and in 1998 he was the 226th pick in the NFL Draft. He played safety for the Arizona Cardinals and established himself as a very good player. After the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers, Tillman walked away from a \$3.6M contract and enlisted in the U.S. Army along with his brother Kevin who played baseball in the Cleveland Indians organization.

As one would expect much was made of Pat Tillman's choice. For those supporting the war on terror and later the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it produced excellent copy demonstrating heroic sacrifice by a NFL player. Tillman's decision and football biography were featured on NFL.com and he was hailed as yet another NFL player/patriot in the model of Roger Staubach. Tillman was quoted as saying that he just felt it necessary to pay back the country for the comfortable life he had enjoyed.

Both brothers completed Army Ranger School in late 2002 and were sent to Iraq in 2003. Later transferred to Afghanistan, Pat Tillman was killed in action on April 22, 2004. What followed his death has been less than edifying.

The initial account released by the army told of a brave Corporal Tillman leading his men on an attack of an enemy position during which he was hit by enemy fire and died. He was awarded the Silver Star for combat valor. On May 3 Pat Tillman

was publicly mourned in San Jose, California, in a ceremony featuring Army brass, Sen. John McCain, and a national television audience. A few weeks later Tillman's parents learned that it was not the enemy, but friendly fire that killed their son. This was known prior to the Silver Star award and the public ceremony in San Jose but not revealed.

According to Pat Tillman, Sr., the army repeatedly lied to the family about the facts of his son's death. In a recent letter to the Washington Post, he wrote, "I was briefed three times with a sales pitch of made-up 'facts' and assurances of investigative integrity." He also said that all physical evidence at the scene of the killing was destroyed on orders from army superiors. Tillman said that the army did not make mistakes in the investigation of his son's death, but rather these "mistakes" were "deliberate, calculated, ordered (repeatedly) and disgraceful."

The army's motives were seen as a need to protect the image of what Tillman's father called "their poster boy," and a desire to have a heroic tale to offset the negative publicity from the Abu Graibe revelations. Tillman's mother was particularly offended when President Bush sent a taped message to the Arizona Cardinals' ceremony honoring Pat Tillman that took place a few weeks prior to the election, feeling her son's death was being "used" by the President.

The mixing of sports and patriotism, the use of sporting events as venues for patriotic display, the use of athletes as promoters of war and other public policy is done with considerable frequency. The NFL is particularly attached to these patriotic spectacles. The Air Force flyovers at the climactic moment of the playing of the national anthem have become routine. The unfurling of the football field sized flags at the same ceremony is commonplace. The Super Bowl excesses of patriotic expression are now legion and legend.

In other sports much the same has happened. Service men and women are honored and that is appropriate, but these ceremonies too easily slip over into support for the war and policies that underlay the reality of war. The placing of the flag on uniforms, helmets, and backboards, again seems harmless enough and even something that is good, but these actions are too often interpreted as an endorsement of policy.

Woe to any player who dissents from such action. Steve Nash was roundly booed and denounced in Dallas when he expressed his

opposition to the war. Carlos Delgado has taken considerable public flack for his anti-war stance. Those who protested by not appearing or standing for the national anthem have been criticized sharply for their actions. The war to spread democracy through the Middle East has placed curbs on freedom of expression, a fundamental right in a democratic society. War nearly always has this effect on the home front.

The case of Pat Tillman and the experiences of the Tillman family should be a cautionary tale for us all. Pat Tillman was a hero because he carried out his duty as he saw it. He gave his life in the process. To honor him is certainly appropriate.

A government that lies about a soldier's death to family and nation, a government that manipulates the images of death and sport to promote a war, and a sports culture that participates enthusiastically in this process, are not worthy of their claim that they seek to promote the cause to which the soldiers gave their lives.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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