

Sacrifice, Patriotism, and Pat Tillman

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In the media, stories are often carefully selected, romanticized and expanded to express larger principles. Such stories may sell more papers, but they also shape beliefs by engaging emotions, suppressing reason and ignoring divergent information. In *Sentimental Journeys*, Joan Didion introduces the concept of a sentimental narrative through the lens of the popularized 1989 rape and murder case of the New York ‘Jogger.’ The essay discusses the effects of the contrived story on individuals and society, namely, perpetuating class disparities and compromising the effectiveness of the justice system. One particularly sentimental account in the media today, emerging from the current effort to ‘fight’ terrorism, describes the death of professional football player, Pat Tillman, in Afghanistan on 22 April 2004 at the age of 27. The story idealizes Tillman’s choice to join the armed forces as the ultimate sacrifice and deems him a hero for his courage and unquestioning patriotism. The rhetoric is highly sentimental in its talk of sacrifice, courage and heroism. Furthermore, the language has been adopted by public figures who knew or have sympathy for Tillman, offering the media further material with which to idealize the account. Tillman’s early death is sad; but, the idealization of his story marginalizes other noteworthy but peaceful efforts to decrease acts of aggression by operating under the assumption that engaging in armed warfare is the most noble and practical approach to fighting terrorism—engendering the idea that one should join the armed forces and fight like the demonstrated hero, Pat Tillman.

The unfortunate death of Pat Tillman occurred in Southeastern Afghanistan in Operation Mountain Storm—a

subset effort of the larger Operation Enduring Freedom designed to weaken al-Qaeda forces and the Taliban government. Tillman graduated in high standing from Arizona State University, where he earned a degree in marketing and played for the Sun Devils football team. He was a key player and named the Pac-10 defensive player of the year in 1997.¹ The following year, he was drafted into the NFL by the Arizona Cardinals—to which he remained loyal for four years. He was positioned as starting safety for the Cardinals and in 2000, broke a team record with 224 tackles.¹ Affected by the September 11th attacks, Tillman decided to contribute to the effort of dispelling terrorism by joining the armed forces eight months later—which he saw as a form of duty and something greater than playing football. In an interview with NBC News, he said, “My great grandfather was at Pearl Harbor, and a lot of my family has . . . gone and fought in wars, and I really haven’t done a damn thing as far as laying myself on the line like that.”² Tillman was based at Fort Lewis, Washington in the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment. He fought in Iraq until December 2003, when he returned home. Shortly after this, the military stationed his platoon in Afghanistan.¹ According to Lt. Col. Matthew Beevers, U.S. military spokesman, Tillman was killed at night by enemy fire, 25 miles from a U.S. base at Khost. In an effort to joust an attack by Afghan forces, Tillman’s platoon pursued the soldiers and engaged in a fire battle that lasted 15-20 minutes. Tillman was killed in the battle, along with an Afghan on his side. An Afghan commander, Gen. Khial Bas, said that nine of the Afghan soldiers were killed.²

The story of Pat Tillman’s death abruptly evolved into a master or sentimental narrative, a contrived interpretation and

¹ “Tillman Killed While Serving as Army Ranger,” *ESPN: NFL*, 30 April 2004, 1 May 2004 <<http://sports.espn.go.com/nfl/news/story?id=1788232>>.

² “Ex-NFL Star Tillman Makes ‘Ultimate Sacrifice,’” *MSNBC News*, 30 April 2004, 2 May 2004 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4815441/>>.

description of an event that, by its high emotional content and easy generalization to higher principles, is fit for mass consumption and proliferated throughout society. It involves portrayals of Tillman as an Americanized Jesus figure, who courageously sacrificed the most comfortable form of success, fame and wealth, for the good of his country; for which he is deemed a hero and inspiration. Websites and Newspapers are plastered with headlines emphasizing the sacrificial interpretation of his actions. They span, “Tillman Killed in Afghanistan: Former Cardinals safety walked away from NFL to join Army Rangers,”³ and “*Ex-NFL Star Tillman Makes ‘Ultimate Sacrifice’*.”⁴ Stories read repetitively, “Tillman, 27, walked away from a three-year, \$3.6 million contract offer from the Arizona Cardinals to join the Army in 2002,”⁵ “Pat Tillman gave up the glamour of the NFL to serve his country,”⁶ and “Pat Tillman . . . gave up the glamorous life of a professional football star to join the Army Rangers . . .”⁴ This is not a new take on the issue. When Tillman joined the Army in 2002, a *Sports Illustrated* article declared, “It’s a remarkable story: Star athlete walks away from the game in his prime, leaving millions in cash on the table, to put his life at risk in service of his country during wartime.”³ The story is further romanticized by presenting Tillman as an inspiration and hero for his patriotic sacrifice and subsequent death. Tillman is said to be “remembered as a role model of courage and patriotism.”⁷ In brief, he is said to be, “an honorable man who overachieved on the football field then

became a war hero when he died in Afghanistan after walking away from a multimillion-dollar contract to join the U.S. Army.”⁸

As in the media, the narrative is at once adopted and catalyzed by public figures. In other words, public figures provide feedback for the media that allows the sentimentality of the narrative to evolve and be substantiated by reality—a similar pattern is apparent in the coverage of Didion’s Jogger case. A former Cardinals coach, Dave McGinnis, comments on Tillman’s character: “Pat knew his purpose in life. He proudly walked away from a career in football to a greater calling.”⁷ The Vice President of the team stated, “He is a hero. He was a brave man. There are very few people who have the courage to do what he did, the courage to walk away from a professional sports career and make the ultimate sacrifice.”⁷ Mark Schlereth, player for the Denver Broncos stated, “He [Tillman] was an American hero. He had the courage of his convictions to walk away from the money, prestige, celebrity and fame that an NFL career offers. To do that takes incredible amounts of integrity and heroism.”⁹ A statement put out by the white house called Tillman, “an inspiration both on an off the football field.”¹⁰ The general manager of the Seattle Seahawks who assisted in drafting Tillman to the Cardinals remarked, “Pat represents all that is good with this country, our society and ultimately the human condition in general.” He added, “In today’s world of instant gratification and selfishness, here is a man that was defined by words like loyalty, honor, passion, courage,

³ “Tillman Killed in Afghanistan,” *CNN/Sports Illustrated: NFL*, 23 April 2004, 1 May 2004 <<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2004/football/nfl/04/23/tillman.killed/>>.

⁴ “Ex-NFL Star Tillman Makes ‘Ultimate Sacrifice’.”

⁵ “Tillman Promoted Posthumously by Army,” *MSNBC News*, 30 April 2004, 2 May 2004 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4838924/>>.

⁶ Tom Barnidge, “Tillman Follows Beat of a Different Drum,” *CBS: NFL Insider*, 20 March 2003, 2 May 2004 <<http://www.nfl.com/insider/story/5701425>>.

⁷ “Ex-NFL Star Tillman Makes ‘Ultimate.’”

⁸ May Wong, “Thousands Gather to Mourn Tillman in Hometown,” *AOL Sports News*, 3 May 2004, 3 May 2004 <<http://aolsvc.news.aol.com/sports/article.adp?id=20040503180109990001>>.

⁹ “Tillman Killed While Serving as Army Ranger.”

¹⁰ “Tillman Killed in Afghanistan.”

strength and nobility. He is a modern-day hero."¹¹ The repetitive ambiguity continues. Arizona Senator, John Kyl claimed in a statement that Tillman was, "a great American hero in the truest sense. His patriotism and courage are an inspiration and we are grateful for his ultimate sacrifice."¹¹

Along with being praised for his sacrifice and heroism, Tillman is presented as a man of integrity because of his unquestioning patriotism. An article from CBS's *NFL Insider* stated, "you didn't need to dig too deeply to find an explanation for his actions." The same article paraphrases a statement by Larry Marmie, defensive coordinator of the Cardinals, as, "Tillman felt he needed to 'pay something back' for the comfortable life he had been afforded."¹² Statements like these depict Tillman's decision as deeply felt and produced from a sense of duty. However, the praise of anti-reason is manipulative by indirectly suggesting that all citizens should pay off their country by fighting in its war and not questioning its validity.

The Army awarded Tillman, posthumously, the Silver Star, for fighting "without regard for his personal safety," and as a further gesture of commemoration, promoted him from specialist to corporal.¹³ The Silver Star is one of the Army's most distinguished awards, specified, as if straight from Homer's *Iliad*, for "gallantry on the battlefield," accept this battle has a clear underdog.¹⁴ Out of praise and respect for his talent and sacrifice, the plaza of the new Cardinals stadium under construction has been named the *Pat Tillman Freedom Plaza*—solidifying the ties between the Tillman story and the rhetoric used in that of the fight against terrorism. These gestures honor the master narrative

by providing a comfortable ending that is based in reality and thus serve as symbolic representations of its sentimentality.

On the surface, the numerous statements about the deceased rightfully pay tribute to a human life. However, the repetitive grandiloquence of the rhetoric shapes and solidifies the sentimental narrative by oversimplifying and idealizing. In reality, Tillman's decision to join the reserves was most likely very complex and cannot be so easily boiled down to represent courage, sacrifice and heroism. Furthermore, language such as this perpetuates certain assumptions that can falsely influence the public. First, the master narrative assumes that fame and money is the highest mark of success and happiness by referring to its detachment as the 'ultimate sacrifice'. This is a broader principle that exists in the sentimental narrative of America under the title, "the American Dream". Nonetheless, it is an unproven assumption that falsely engenders the idea of great sacrifice, which leads to further claims. Secondly, the narrative assumes that patriotic sacrifice is necessarily honorable and virtuous. Specifically, the narrative assumes that engaging in armed warfare with people in the Middle East to rid the world of unpredictable acts of aggression under the ideal of 'serving ones country' or patriotism is a noble act to be lauded. The narrative coerces the reader into applauding the fruits of capitalism and the virtuous sacrifice of joining the Army; and, ultimately, makes him or her more sympathetic towards the war effort through a logical leap that suppresses any information suggesting the practicality of the war cause or method. It seems obvious that any government is liable to make mistakes or proceed on a mission selfishly, because the officials who run it are human beings, susceptible to the desires of wealth and power. In short, they do not always act altruistically and under the noble principles one presumes to support through unquestioning patriotism. The sentimentality is so strong in this particular account that the death of a soldier furthers sentiment that fighting a war is a just cause. No such judgment should be

¹¹ "Tillman Killed in Afghanistan."

¹² Barnidge.

¹³ "Tillman Promoted Posthumously by Army."

¹⁴ "Tillman Promoted Posthumously by Army."

made, however, without further information about the war.

Perhaps cognitive dissonance in the media and supporters of the war effort can explain all this—that is, their inclination to create artificial defense for an action that is irreconcilable with facts and sincere reasoning. It would be much harder to deal with the death of American troops if the war lacked a just cause, and thus the act of sending troops to war becomes, in effect, rationale for going to war in the first place. In the same way, cognitive dissonance might be the mechanism behind the enduring popular slogan “Support Our Troops”—which neglects the question of whether the troops are fighting for a cause worth supporting. Finally, the sentimental story, likely induced by cognitive dissonance, overshadows other efforts to dispel terrorism by suggesting that Tillman’s acts are the most notable and worthy of attention. Whatever the mechanisms behind the assumptions and logical leaps that underlie sentimental narratives, such as Pat Tillman’s or the New York Jogger’s, their content influences readers perspectives or rallies their support for a cause through suppressing logos and emphasizing pathos. Sentimental narratives are therefore manipulative, creating widespread ignorance and sometimes resulting in unjustified murder and death.

Afterward

The sentimental story of Pat Tillman is all over the media and the public has adopted the rhetoric. On 3 May 2004, the front page news story of the AOL website commemorated Tillman with an article and offered a forum entitled, “Share Your Condolences.” One post, under the name Myannisto stated, “Thank You Pat Tillman. You fought for our country, our freedom, and what you believed in.” Another by KD 4Man wrote in all caps, “Patriotism is a just a word to most of us. To Pat it was life (grammatical error included).” The posts also included a topic entitled, “How is he a hero?” Which offered a discussion of the question of Pat Tillman’s heroism. It received 84 hits, by far the most of all the topics. Interestingly, within minutes of viewing these statements, the server blocked the topic and it soon disappeared from the list. This is an example of the tendency of the mainstream media to block discussion in order to stick to a sentimental narrative. Perhaps it is yet another symptom of cognitive dissonance.¹⁵

¹⁵ Wong.

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