

SPEAKERS FOR THE DEAD: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION  
OF THE PAT TILLMAN DEATH NARRATIVE

by

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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

As a National Football League (NFL) safety for the Arizona Cardinals in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Pat Tillman was known for his physical prowess and leadership capabilities. However, it was his rejection of a \$3.6 million dollar NFL contract to join the U.S. military following the 9/11 tragedy that made Tillman a household name. Unfortunately, the American public was thrust into mourning when Tillman lost his life in Afghanistan, on April 22, 2004. In death, Tillman received a nationally televised funeral ceremony and was awarded the Purple Heart and Silver Star for his actions. Governmental and military reports indicated that Tillman had been killed during a skirmish with enemy forces. Yet, five weeks after telling the American public that Tillman was killed by enemy forces, the Pentagon admitted that the football star perished due to friendly-fire. By analyzing 150 pieces of United States news media, this study attends to the public controversy surrounding the ways that Tillman's death narrative was constructed potentially to advance U.S. foreign policy goals and to articulate the government's concept of the "ideal" American citizen.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Sayed Farhad. A true face of the War on Terror.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Public conceptualizations of heroism in U.S. culture are typically contested and can differ greatly depending on the challenges that the nation faces. Often in times of relative comfort the U.S. public looks to movies, sports, and entertainment as a dominant source for potential role models. Conversely, during periods of war it is characteristically public service, patriotism, and sacrifice that are prerequisites for heroism. Few individuals have appealed to both war and peace-time perspectives of heroism. However, professional football player Pat Tillman represented both fame and altruism in his embodiment of heroism.

As a National Football League (NFL) safety for the Arizona Cardinals, Tillman was known for his physical prowess and leadership abilities in the late 1990s and early 2000s. And when this rising star rejected a three million dollar contract to join the U.S. Army as a corporal in May 2002, he was elevated to the status of “superhero” (Christie 6). Many were surprised that Tillman rejected the fame and monetary affluence typical of a professional athlete. Months later, surprise was transformed into utter shock and despair when military officials reported, in April 2004, that Tillman was “killed during a firefight in southeastern Afghanistan” (Miles 1). Much of the nation was struck with grief as this young, selfless soldier lost his life in sacrifice to the public good. Numerous public monuments were dedicated to Tillman, a military base was named in his honor, and his funeral was nationally televised. Additionally, in death Tillman was honored with the Silver Star, the third highest honor for a person in the U.S. military, for his

actions and was nationally memorialized for his sacrifice (“Army Awards Silver Star to Fallen Ranger”).

However, in the weeks that followed, information began to build that conflicted with the initial military reports surrounding Tillman’s death. As one newspaper reported, “Pat Tillman died a hero’s death. At least, that is what America was told when this former football star and steel-jawed poster boy for the War on Terror, returned home in a box” (Laurence 1). Five weeks after telling the U.S. public that Tillman was killed by terrorists, the Pentagon admitted that the football star died an accidental death.<sup>1</sup> After an exhaustive investigation by Congress and the U.S. military, the public learned that Tillman was not killed by terrorists but instead was a victim of friendly fire (“Department of Defense News Briefing” 1). Public outrage soon followed, in May 2005, as government<sup>2</sup> officials were accused of allegedly manipulating Tillman’s death and withholding information to bolster support for the War on Terror and the War in Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Even military officials admitted that, “[m]any have come to believe that the Army manipulated that tragedy [Tillman’s death] to serve their ends other than the pursuit of truth, deceiving a grieving family and violating our duty to a fallen comrade” (“Department of Defense News Briefing” 1). Ultimately, after seven internal military investigations and one major Congressional inquiry, in

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<sup>1</sup> The initial military report of Tillman’s death on April 24, 2004 did not clearly identify Tillman’s killer/s. Neither word “terrorist” nor “insurgent” was used by the government. Instead the release simply stated the Tillman’s patrol was “ambushed” by the “enemy.” However, since the report began with the words “He was so moved by the events of Sept. 11 2001,” along with the emphasis that southeastern Afghanistan was a hotbed for al-Qaeda, possibly the government’s rhetoric implied that the culprits were “terrorists” for many readers.

<sup>2</sup> Whenever the term “government” is used I am specifically referring to the administration of the 43<sup>rd</sup> President George W. Bush along with his military officials. As the commander-in-chief, the President of the United States is inextricably linked to the military and its leadership. Military officials and key white house staff were both heavily involved with the public relations aspect of Tillman’s death.

<sup>3</sup> The “War on Terror” is a very abstract concept and policy. The War on Terror is commonly considered military action against Islamic terrorism following 9/11. However, since it was discovered that Iraq was not connected to the 9/11 conspirators, some have argued that the Iraq War does not fall into the global War on Terror. A more in-depth analysis of the scope of the War on Terror is offered in Patrick Hayden’s book *American’s War on Terror*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003. For this study I consider the War on Terror to mean the military operations in Afghanistan, and Iraq since the Bush administration used similar language when discussing the two. While the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq share numerous similarities and differences, the rhetorical differentiation of the two wars is not the purpose of this study.

2007, it became clear that the Bush Administration and U.S. military possibly went to great lengths to present a fictional tale of Tillman's death which advanced their national policy (U.S. House "Misleading Information" 15-25).

This study attends to the public controversy surrounding the ways that Tillman's death narrative was constructed to advance U.S. foreign policy goals and to articulate the government's concept of the "ideal" American citizen.<sup>4</sup> The texts for this rhetorical analysis came from both official governmental documents and popular news media within two important time periods in the Tillman controversy. Initially, official government documents, military press releases, White House emails, and U.S. mass media were examined between April 22, 2004 and May 29, 2004. This timeframe encompasses the date of Tillman's death, April 22, 2004, up to the time when the government officially recognized large inaccuracies in the reporting of his death, May 29, 2004. This period is the foundation of the analysis since it was during this time that the Tillman death narrative was forged and dispatched throughout American society. The analysis from subsequent years helps illuminate the rhetorical magnitude of this initial stage. Finally, attention was paid to U.S. news media in reaction of two books dedicated to Tillman's legacy, published in 2008 and 2009. The first, *Boots on the Ground by Dusk: My Tribute to Pat Tillman*, was written by Tillman's mother, Mary, and was published on May 12, 2008. The second, *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman* was written by journalist Jon Krakauer and released on September 15, 2009. The views presented in these books were analyzed, as well as the

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<sup>4</sup> By "death narrative" I am referring to the government's depiction of the circumstances of Tillman's death in Afghanistan. As the name implies, a death narrative is a story about the final moments of life. However, as Kitch argues, "coverage of a death is partly the retelling of the story of a life" ("A Death in the American Family" 299). Thus, a death narrative is unique since it not only describes a person's death but also highlights the "important" events of that person's life making a death narrative similar to a eulogy.

media reaction two weeks before and after their publication, in order to gauge the evolution of the Tillman narrative and public memory over time.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, this thesis relies on more than 150 pieces of American news media as both primary and secondary evidence for the analysis.<sup>6</sup> The selection of news articles was determined by two criteria: first, preference was given to U.S. media since the research is centered on the rhetorical creation of Tillman as an American symbol, and second, articles were chosen that used official governmental information in the reporting. Finally, several articles and websites were also selected based on their focus on Tillman's social importance. For example, *ESPN* writer Mike Fish's award winning four part series investigating the Tillman controversy is one of the most in-depth looks into the meaning of Tillman's memory. Furthermore, the website *legacy.com* was examined in order to gauge public reactions to Tillman's death.<sup>7</sup> Media analysis is a valuable methodology for such a study because as communication scholar Carolyn Kitch reports, news media create "catharsis and consolation" during national funeral ceremonies ("Mourning in America" 214). Also, a considerable amount of research has concluded that the media plays a vital role in helping society conceptualize tragedy and recover in the wake of loss.<sup>8</sup>

The Tillman case is worthy of study for various social and rhetorical reasons. Initially, although thousands of people have lost their lives during the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Tillman was "the most high-profile casualty of the US war effort" (Pennington 2). As one of the

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<sup>5</sup> Thus, this thesis explores texts that span from 2004-2009, a window of analysis that may seem overly ambitious. However, within this span of time, roughly only two months of discourse are actually explored.

<sup>6</sup> Articles were collected with the use of the LexisNexis, Gale, Pro-quest, and Ebsco-host, database systems.

<sup>7</sup> Legacy.com is website where individuals are able to post messages, condolences, or notes on-line about the deceased. As of the writing of this thesis over 5,700 entries have been dedicated to Tillman's obituary from people across the country.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the impact of media on national mourning consult Carolyn Kitch's "A Death in the American Family: Myth, Memory, and National Values in the Media Mourning of John F. Kennedy Jr.," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 79 (2002): 294-309. Moreover, Kitch looks at the specific role of media in facilitating recovery following tragedy in "'Mourning in America': Ritual, Redemption and Recovery in News Narrative After September 11," *Journalism Studies* 4 (2003): 213-24. See also Pantili and Wieten, "Mourning Becomes the Nation: Television Coverage of the Murder of Pim Fortuyn." *Journalism Studies* 6 (2005): 301-13.

most recognizable figure participating in the War on Terror, his life and death offer a nexus of social, political, and communicative forces. California Representative Henry Waxman, the chairman of the congressional investigation into the mishandling of Tillman's death, argued:

We're focused on Pat Tillman's case because the misinformation was so profound and because it persisted so long. And if that can happen to the most famous soldier serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, it leaves many families and many of us questioning the accuracy of information from many other casualties. (Kruzel par. 11)

The government and military are responsible for informing the American public about the events that occur during war. Thus, the Tillman case seriously calls into question the authenticity and motivation behind military reporting of casualties, as well as the way that the public interacts with such information.

The unique power governmental officials possess in disseminating knowledge during times of war drastically impacts the meaning of conflict for the American public. Due in part to the negative publicity of the Vietnam War, contemporary military planners have drastically increased efforts to devise a "system of media control" to "drum up patriotism" (Kumar "Media, War, and Propaganda" 50). The possible manipulation of Tillman's death illustrates the rhetorical power that military planners and governmental officials have in transforming conceptions of the past, present, and future in times of war. The death and destruction endemic in war has the ability to make the populace malleable to institutional forces. As communication and journalism researchers Mervi Pantii and Johanna Sumiala argue, public rituals after death and tragedy are a great opportunity for those in power to mold society to their liking since "grief becomes a major form of nation-building" (127). Concurrently, my position is that the loss of a beloved American symbol, such as Tillman, motivated members of the U.S. public to look both internally and externally in order to reevaluate social values, norms, and future political action.

This research explores the communicative and symbolic impact that Tillman's death narrative had for the American polis and policy makers. I investigate the ways that Tillman's death was rhetorically formatted to gain support for the War on Terror. Additionally, the project explores the methods through which the Tillman narrative revealed desirable characteristics for the nation during times of war. An underlying hypothesis for this study was that Tillman's death narrative was likely crafted by the government to promote institutional ideologies and foster public support for the War on Terror. Furthermore, Tillman's death became a potential conduit through which the government was able to articulate its visualization of a "correct" America. Specifically, I maintain the death narrative's rhetoric was a manifestation of the government, military, and news media's glorification of white masculinity in society. The following research resulted from my attempt to answer these questions:

- 1.) What rhetorical nuances and strategies reflected in Tillman's death narrative functioned to perpetuate the War on Terror?
- 2.) In what ways did the Tillman death narrative's discourse function to establish pro-war sentiment in American society?
- 3.) Which dominate national values and characteristics did the Tillman narrative's rhetoric attempt to elevate in the American consciousness?
- 4) As a space of rhetorical contention, how has the Tillman legacy been adapted over time by contested political groups?

#### Pat Tillman: Life, Death, and Controversy

In order to gain adequate insight and perspective into how the death narrative functioned rhetorically, a brief timeline of the important events that constitute the Tillman controversy is necessary. Since multiple versions of Tillman's death were reported, along with numerous

investigations, establishing an accurate chronology within the narrative is challenging. By using the timeline of events as a starting point, this study aims to reveal possible ways the Bush administration, U.S. military, and news media all emphasized selected parts of Tillman's life and death for political purposes.

After graduating from Arizona State University, Tillman's professional football career began in April 1998, when he was drafted by the NFL's Arizona Cardinals. After being drafted, Tillman's career with the Cardinals gained minimal national recognition until May 2002, when he and his brother Kevin enlisted in the U.S. Army (Bordow 2). Although Tillman attempted to make his decision private, by refusing to discuss his enrollment in interviews, his participation in the armed services was a well publicized example of exceptional service and patriotism. Hundreds of newspaper articles and television segments were dedicated to Tillman's decision, and he was awarded the 2003 Arthur Ashe Courage Award, despite refusing to attend the ceremony (Woolsey 1).<sup>9</sup>

While in the military, Tillman participated in operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, Tillman's first mission was actually to aid the rescue of noteworthy female prisoner Jessica Lynch (Krakauer 174). On April 22, 2004, Tillman died forty kilometers southwest of the village of Sperah, in eastern Afghanistan, after a fellow soldier accidentally shot him in the head three times (Miles 1). Whenever a soldier dies in conflict, military protocol dictates notification of the family before the information is made public. Though Tillman's death occurred on April 22, the official announcement by the military was not made until April 23 (Fish "Timeline" 1).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Pat Tillman shared the award in 2003 with his brother Kevin, a minor league baseball player who also put his athletic career on hold to join the armed forces. Although the recognition was awarded to both brothers, Kevin did not receive the level of attention that his older brother, due in part, to the fact that Pat was a professional athlete who rejected a multi-million dollar contract.

<sup>10</sup> As Mary Tillman remarks in her book *Boots on the Ground by Dusk: My Tribute to Pat Tillman*, New York: Modern Times, 2008, her family was not properly notified before the public (117). The lack of proper recognition

Although forces on the ground knew immediately that Tillman had died from friendly fire, military officials reported that Tillman was killed during a firefight with the enemy (Krakauer 272-75). On April 30, roughly one week after his death, Tillman was posthumously awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart for his bravery and service (“Army Awards Silver Star to Fallen Ranger”). These awards were presented to Tillman’s family on May 3, during the public memorial service. The funeral proceedings were highly covered events in the Untied States and were presented on national television with a televised audience in the millions (Laurence 39). Along with the televised funeral, various public ceremonies commemorated Tillman, including the retiring of his number by the Arizona Cardinals, on September 19, 2004.

After pressuring officials to provide further information concerning the details of his passing, on May 28, 2004, the military informed the Tillman family that Tillman was likely killed by friendly fire instead of by enemy forces. Once it became public that Tillman was shot by a fellow soldier, journalists and the general public alike grew distrustful. Since it took almost five weeks for the original reports to be rescinded, many people expressed suspicion that the public may had been purposefully misled. Pat’s brother and fellow soldier Kevin Tillman, accused the government with transforming Tillman’s death into “an inspirational message that served instead to support the nation’s foreign policy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” (U.S. House “Misleading Information” 8). Furthermore, conspiracy theories began to circulate that perhaps Tillman was murdered by the U.S. government to keep his growing anti-war beliefs quiet. The anti-establishment website, *altermedia.info*, ran a story in September 2005 entitled “Was Hero Pat Tillman Murdered by Neocons?” where the authors determined the government’s actions were likely evidence for an “assassination” of Tillman (Buchanan 1). Public outcry and

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has contributed to the family’s belief that the government purposefully used Tillman’s death to facilitate the Bush administration’s agenda.

unrelenting pressure from the Tillman family resulted in seven internal investigations by the military to determine what exactly happened to Tillman and to confirm how the information was handled and disseminated to the public (“Department of Defense New Briefing with Secretary Geren and Gen. Cody from the Pentagon”).<sup>11</sup> In June 2005, the U.S. Army apologized for the delay of accurate information to the Tillman family; however, its investigation concluded that Tillman was not murdered and that there was no direct intent to mislead the public (Collier 1).

As the War on Terror marched on, in 2004 and 2005, other cases of potential manipulation by the Bush Administration surfaced. For instance, the March 2003 story of Private Jessica Lynch’s heroic actions following capture were also found to be blatantly false (“Putting Faces on Pentagon Lies” 1).<sup>12</sup> Multiple reports of government dishonesty, along with the escalating human and financial toll, helped contribute to a drastic decline in public approval of the Bush administration and the War on Terror (“Bush’s Final Approval Rating: 22 Percent”). As public opinion shifted firmly against the war and suspicion of dishonesty increased, the United States Congress Committee on Oversight and Government Reform investigated the amount of misinformation that was being directed towards the public concerning Tillman in April, 2007 (Fish “An Un-American Tragedy” 1). Taking place over several days, the hearings reviewed hundreds of official Bush Administration emails, interviewed top military generals, and questioned Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld about his role in a possible cover-up.

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<sup>11</sup> Traditionally the military has an unofficial policy of investigating issues and handling grievances with their own internal investigations. The U.S. military conducted seven internal reviews concerning the Tillman incident before Congress began its own inquiry in April of 2007.

<sup>12</sup> The Jessica Lynch saga has received considerable attention in communication and gender studies. For more information on Lynch and the interplay of sex and gender in military representations of heroism see Shannon Holland’s “The Dangers of Playing Dress-up: Popular Representations of Jessica Lynch and the Controversy Regarding Women in Combat,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 27-50. For a further discussion of how Lynch’s gender was used by the military for purposes of propaganda see Deepa Kumar’s “War Propaganda and the (Ab)Uses of Women: Media Construction of the Jessica Lynch Story,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (2004): 297-313.

In the end, few conclusions were reached by the hearings since “on the key issue of what senior officials knew, the investigation was frustrated by a near universal lack of recall” (U.S. House “Misleading Information” 1). Although hundreds of emails were found which discussed Tillman’s death, there was an odd lack of communication about his death being caused by fratricide. According to the Congressional report, “[i]n comparison to the extensive White House activity that followed Corporal Tillman’s death, the complete absence of any communication about his fratricide is hard to understand [...] there is not a single discussion of the fratricide in any of these communications” (U.S. House “Misleading Information”2). Although no criminal charges followed after the investigation, congressional investigators concluded that the manipulations of the Tillman and Lynch stories were beyond mere coincidence.

#### Précis

The Tillman controversy functioned as a rhetorical constellation of narrative, hegemonic masculinity, sport culture, myth, and public memory, making the death narrative worthy of analysis. Narrative analysis offers insight into the internal and external structures and functions of the Tillman death narrative, revealing the underlying values American society holds in times of war. Following a close examination of the official narrative of Tillman’s death, this study attempts to illuminate the ways that Tillman’s masculinity and sports background were rhetorically constructed by various sources to support military operations in the Middle East. Finally, mythic criticism and public memory provide the rhetorical lenses for revealing how Tillman was transformed into a mythic hero participating in a new Frontier Myth, where the challenge was directed towards American society to finish the fight against terrorism.

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapter Two discusses the previous research from the field of communication studies in the operationalization of narrative analysis, hegemonic masculinity, sports-culture, myth, and public memory. Furthermore, Chapter Two outlines the specific methodology used in this study.

Chapter Three analyzes the death narrative of Tillman by viewing it through the lens of Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm in an attempt to offer thick description of the form and function of the narrative. Applying Shaul Shenhav's concept of "Thin and Thick" narrative analysis in order to place the narrative within its political context. The analysis also uses Mervi Pantii and Johanna Sumiala's notion of the "Sacred Centre" to describe the predominant social values elevated by those in power. I argue the narrative demonstrated the meaning of sacrifice and violence as governing American values during times of war. Finally, I identify specific rhetorical components within the narrative which likely motivated the American public to support war. I contend that the narrative's discourse incited national support for the War on Terror by extending the events of 9/11 and establishing guilt, transferring ethos from Tillman to those in the government and military, and presenting an oversimplified version of war.

Chapter Four applies Nick Trujillo's method of hegemonic masculinity to the Tillman narrative to illustrate how the narrative reflected dominant social values of white nationalism and strict gender separation in the U.S. military and society. By relying on the work of Samantha King, Sue Curry Jansen, and Don Sabo, I also discuss the role that sport and masculinity likely played in advancing Tillman as a cultural symbol and motivation for warfare. News media texts are examined for the integration of sport as metaphor for war. I assert the death narrative's rhetoric further enforced the ideological union between the NFL and the U.S. military.

Through an exploration of the Frontier Myth as referenced by Janice Hocker Rushing, Leroy Dorsey, Mark West and Chris Carey, Chapter Five explores the ways that Tillman was elevated to the status of mythic hero by those in the government, military, and news media. Specifically, I discuss how the rhetoric of the death narrative represented the Frontier Myth in which the American public was charged with finishing the fight against terrorism. Furthermore, by referencing public memory research developed by Barbie Zelizer my analysis focuses on how Tillman's public memory was formed and evolved. I argue that the public memory of Tillman's life and death was adopted over time by oppositional groups for ideological purposes and that Tillman's memory continues to be a space of rhetorical contention.

The final chapter summarizes the study's findings and discusses its implications for communication research and the broader American public. I describe the contribution of this thesis to the field of communication studies and also offer several suggestions for future study concerning the rhetorical dynamics of death. Furthermore, I discuss the role of the U.S. media in the dissemination of information to the American public during times of war. In light of this research, I contend that both rhetorical critics and the American populace should be wary of institutional representations of death.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As presented in Chapter One, this study employs multiple rhetorical methodologies to explore the intricacies of the Pat Tillman death narrative. This chapter reviews the academic literature relevant to this study of narrative analysis, hegemonic masculinity and sport culture, and Frontier Myth and public memory. The chapter ends by outlining how this critical framework has been operationalized to the Tillman case.

To begin, let me provide an overview of research pertaining to narrative analysis. Based on the government report, “Misleading Information” Congress found strong evidence to suggest that government officials tampered with the circumstances surrounding Tillman’s death. Narrative analysis is a useful methodological perspective to apply in this case because it allows the critic to map the ways that stories are told for persuasive political purposes. The literature review continues with an exploration of hegemonic masculinity and sport culture research in communication studies. Tillman’s masculinity and athletic status were also vital to the construction of his symbolism for national pride and excellence. The last methodological section of the literature review appraises research concerning myth and public memory to draw parallels between the Tillman narrative and the Frontier Myth in American society.

#### Narrative Analysis

The analysis of narrative, or story telling, has become one of the most widely accepted methodological approaches throughout the critical humanities. According to political scientist

and communication researcher Shaul R. Shenhav, “One now finds references to narrative in the fields of psychology, history, media studies, sociology, law, cinematography, and political science, in addition to the traditional use of the term by literary critics and narratologists”(76). In the field of communication studies, the architect of narrative analysis is Walter Fisher, who developed his theoretical concept in 1984. He defines narrative as “a theory of symbolic actions (words and/or deeds) that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, and interpret them” (“Narration as a Human” 1984, 2). Before Fisher’s narrative paradigm, many communication researchers were primarily interested in the argumentation and logic found within discourse. Conversely, Fisher argues that a more appropriate method of analysis focuses on story-telling, instead of revolving strictly on the rational world paradigm.

Foundational to the narrative paradigm is Fisher’s contention that logic and argumentation are not entirely natural to the human condition. Rather, he argues that it takes years of study to be able to craft and to conceptualize sound rational argumentation, making it exclusive to those groups with access to such education. In contrast to the arduous process of learning the nature of correct and effective argumentation, most human beings are able to tell and understand stories at an incredibly early age. As summarized by rhetorician Barbara Warnick, “clearly, Fisher has attempted to establish a hierarchy in which narrativity is to be more highly valued than traditional rationality because it is more universal, more compensable, and more widely useful” (175).

Furthermore, since storytelling was the primary method of knowledge transfer before the invention of print, it has played a vital role in the communicative process. As Shenhav explains, “[t]he concept’s wide currency can be attributed to the assumption that human beings have a natural tendency to think in narrative” (76). The integration of humanity and narrativity led

Fisher to dub our species “homo-narrans” or story telling animals (“Narration as a Human” 1984, 1).

Although narrative analysis was initially criticized for being overly subjective, Fisher argues that the “narrative paradigm does not deny reason and rationality; it reconstitutes them, making them amenable to all form of human communication”<sup>13</sup> (“Narration as a Human” 2). Fisher contends that it is possible to analyze stories methodologically. Under what he calls “narrative rationality” Fisher crafts three tenets to his narrative perspective for communication studies: narrative probability, narrative fidelity, and good reasons.

The first component, narrative probability, calls for the researcher to examine the story’s internal coherence. Narratives can be judged based on their levels of clarity and organization. Fisher explains that “narrative probability involves having a coherent story. Narrative probability addresses questions such as: Does the story make sense? Is the story free of contradictions? Does it ‘hang together?’” (“The Narrative Paradigm” 349). Stories with random events and inconceivable plotlines are usually met with poor reception. Furthermore, as Warnick indicates, narrative probability involves the ability of the components of the narrative to create an “organic whole” (177). Although every story is composed of multiple divisible parts, such as events, characters, and setting, all of these elements should interact to create an understandable story. As narrative researcher Lois O. Mink comments, “[a] Narrative must have a unity of its own [...] this is what is acknowledged in saying that it must have a beginning, middle, and an end” (197). The natural flow of the narrative from beginning to end helps the listener to relate to the story being told.

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<sup>13</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of subjectivity in narrative analysis consult Barbara Warnick’s “The Narrative Paradigm: Another Story,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 172-82, where she challenges the usefulness of narrative analysis in communication research and outlines several shortcomings of the methodology.

Second, narrative fidelity, does not examine the physical form of the narrative but rather is concerned with the narrative's familiarity. Fisher describes the second part of his paradigm as the investigation of whether or not the story "rings true" in the mind of the reader ("The Narrative Paradigm" 349). This component has also been described by communication researcher Christopher Caldiero as the story's "correspondence to reality" (4). Essentially, the critic is instructed to compare the narrative to real world experiences and occurrences. Of interest to most narrative inquiries are the ways in which a story does, or does not, relate to other general cultural mythic storylines.

The final component of Fisher's narrative paradigm is the logic of good reasons, which is concerned with the values explicitly and implicitly referenced in the text. Good reasons can be understood as the ways in which people are capable of adhering to the story, because of the shared values represented. For example, many narratives have what is commonly referred to as the "moral" or "lesson" of the story. Caldiero clarifies that readers should be able to conceptualize themes "based on their own realities and judge the story based on their own values and logic" (4). In this way, according to Warnick, Fisher attempts to use narrative analysis in order "to uncover, discuss, and assess implicit values embedded in the text" (172). Fisher outlines five potential questions for the critic to ask, when attempting to unmask the good reasons found in a narrative:

1. What are the implicit and explicit values embedded in a message?
2. Are the values appropriate to the nature of the decision that the message bears upon?
3. What would be the effect of adhering to the values in regard to one's concept of oneself, to one's behavior, to one's relationships with others and society, and to the process of rhetorical transaction?
4. Are the values confirmed or validated in one's personal experience, in the lives or statements of others whom one admires and respects, and/or in a conception of the best audience that one can conceive?

5. Even if a *prima facie* case exists or a burden of proof has been established, are the values the message offers those that, in the estimation of the critic, constitute the ideal basis for human conduct? (“Toward a Logic” 379-80)

By investigating the values that are articulated in the text and the way that these principles are packaged to the listener, Fisher argues the critic is able to “determine whether or not a story is a mask for ulterior motives” (“The Narrative Paradigm” 364). Hence, narrative analysis provides the critic with the opportunity to see through the surface of the discourse to expose the possible motivations of the rhetor.

Since Fisher’s introduction of his narrative paradigm, a wealth of research has been dedicated to determining how best to study narrative in rhetorical criticism. Generally, scholars have found two avenues for analyzing narratives: internal structure and external purpose. The internal structure paradigm corresponds with Fisher’s narrative probability, and draws the attention of the critic to internal coherence. One reoccurring finding in communication studies is the importance of viewing the role of time in the narrative. Mass communication researcher Arthur Asa Berger argues that a central difference between a narrative and a text is that “narratives have a sequence” (19). Thus, the existence of a timeline is involved in the very definition of narrative. When crafting a narrative, the rhetor must be aware of the scope of the story and the ways the account flows. Consequently, when studying a narrative, the critic should consider the ways in which events are included and how incidents are organized.

In concurrence with the critical interest in timeline, a recent push in narrative study has been the recognition of the role that space plays. In his review of narrative literature Shenhav points out that “[t]he theoretical treatment of spatial aspects in narration has been generally neglected, in contrast to heavily theorized dimension of time” (90). Using the example of a previous interview response by former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon concerning the War

on Terror, Shenhav shows that an analysis of space can offer, “Understanding [in] the way spaces are constructed in political narratives [...] for exposing a speaker’s political values and persuasions” (90).<sup>14</sup> The characterization that rhetors give to physical and rhetorical spaces are able to offer insight by illustrating which spaces are desired and contested.

Along with the special and temporal aspects of plot line, another internal component of importance is characterization. All stories are composed of characters. Whether hero or villain, the actors in the narrative are also a major source of interest for rhetorical critics. Sociologist Ronald N. Jacobs elucidates that the characters of narratives allow for the listener to “understand their progress through time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and antiheroes” (1240). Therefore, characters who are familiar to listeners and their experiences can have a profound impact on the way that they conceptualize themselves and the world around them. As Fisher explains, the characters in the narrative play a large role in determining if the story “rings true” for the audience (“The Narrative Paradigm” 349). Through characterization, the listener is able to place her/himself in the story and accept the lessons of the narrative as if s/he participated in the events. The use of characterization in narrative has also proven to be a powerful tool for political purposes. In her 2004 study into the government’s representation of Private Jessica Lynch, media and gender scholar Deepa Kumar found the “rescue narrative [...] served to forward the aims of war propaganda” (“War Propaganda” 297). By crafting Lynch as a hyper-masculine, heroic character, her story and the consequent war resembled a popular Hollywood action movie or video game.

In contrast to studying the internal structure of the narrative, many communication and mass media researchers have studied the external/public reasons for the importance of

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<sup>14</sup> Sharon’s remarks took place in March, 2001, during a photo opportunity between him and President George W. Bush.

narrative.<sup>15</sup> A strategy for narrative analysis, then, is to look at the impact that the story has on the audience. Despite the fact that rhetorical criticism has moved away from direct causality, implicit in the study of narrative is the assumption that stories are powerful rhetorical tools that shape opinions and create meaning. Literary critic Didier Coste argues “an act of communication is narration whenever and only when imparting a transitive view of the world is the effect of the message produced” (4). Therefore, a methodological tactic for the critic is to map the way that a story morphs opinion and changes understanding of events. Studying the long-term impact of fictional narratives, media psychologists Markus Appel and Tobias Richter found that accuracy is not a necessary condition for story telling to have a concerted impact on the listener over time. Instead, they discovered that fictional narratives benefit from a “sleeper effect” in which they are eventually considered to be based on some portion of reality over time (114). Depending on the way that the narrative is packaged and delivered, the accuracy of the account can be relatively unimportant to its persuasiveness.

Another external cause for scholarly interest is the role that narrative plays in addressing society during times of crisis. Linguists Suzanne Eggins and Diane Slade argue that “narratives are stories which are concerned with protagonists who face and resolve problematic experience” (239). All narratives involve some form of conflict involving individuals, groups, or entire societies that must overcome adversity. Narratives themselves have the ability to aid society in reconciling tragedy and trauma. As media studies scholar Robert Karl Manoff claims, “[n]arratives bring order to events by making them something that can be told about; they have

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<sup>15</sup> For more insight into the role of narrative as a national coping mechanism see Adi Drori-Avraham’s “September 11<sup>th</sup> and the Mourning After: Media Narrating Grief,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 20 (2006): 289-97, as well as Carolyn Kitch’s “‘Mourning in America’: Ritual, Redemption, and Recovery in News Narrative After September 11,” *Journalism Studies* 4 (2003): 213-24. For a quantitative study on the psychological impact of narrative see Appel and Richter’s “Persuasive Effects of Fictional Narratives Increase Over Time,” *Media Psychology* 10 (2007): 113-34.

power because they make the world make sense [...] while events create history, the story also creates the event” (228). Narratives are a vital way for people to make sense of the world; therefore, stories have the potential to offer understanding during times of uncertainty. For instance, Carolyn Kitch’s 2002 study into the death of John F. Kennedy, Jr., found that public narration is fundamental in the aftermath of collective loss because of narration’s ability to “unit[e] groups of people” (“A Death in the American Family” 294). As a member of an iconic American family, the loss of John Jr. was a major psychological blow to the public psyche. She concludes, “John Jr.’s family story was a larger narrative that provided a metaphor for American life and offered several ways of discussing tragedy and redemption” (301). Her study shows that although the narration of Kennedy’s death was not completely accurate, and was riddled with hyperbole, it was the story that American “needed” in order to cope with the loss and move on (“A Death in the American Family” 2002, 304). Such narratives concerning the loss of beloved figures have the ability to unify societies around a shared meaning. In a similar type of study involving the assassination of controversial Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, journalism scholars Mervi Pantti and Jan Wieten argue that narratives of Fortuyn found in the media helped transform emotions such as anger and hate into a more a unifying emotion of grief (301). Likewise, I posit that the rhetoric of the Tillman death narrative had a similar impact on creating cohesion and unity during a time of war.

Several studies have also been directed towards the role of narrative in a major crisis in American history, 9/11.<sup>16</sup> In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, U.S. citizens were looking for

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<sup>16</sup> West and Carey explore the interconnection of myth and narrative in the rhetoric of President George W. Bush following 9/11 in “(Re)Enacting Frontier Justice: The Bush Administration’s Tactical Narration of the Old West Fantasy after September 11,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 379-412. Specific interest is paid to Fisher’s narrative paradigm and 9/11 in Christopher Caldiero’s “Crisis Storytelling: Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm and News Reporting,” *American Communication Journal* 9 (2007): 1-10. See also Carolyn Kitch’s “‘Mourning in America’: Ritual, Redemption, and Recovery in News Narrative after September 11,” *Journalism Studies* 4 (2003): 213-24.

explanations and relief, both of which were articulated through the news media's use of narrative. By exploring the media's representation of the events, critical cultural researcher Adi Drori-Avraham argues that the interaction between the narrative depiction of the attacks and the photography "points at the narrative as a discourse that heals and soothes" (291). Furthermore, Kitch found that narratives in 9/11 stories acted chronologically to move the public through the mourning process. As she discusses, "[t]heir narratives did not shift directly from horror to healing, however, they replicated the mourning process, including a crucial middle stage characterized by the expression of both fear and anger" ("Mourning in America" 217). Thus, it becomes clear that narratives are often directed towards resolving problematic experiences and guiding civilization in times of turmoil.

The previous literature offers many illustrations of how the critic may use narrative analysis during times of crisis. Sociologist and rhetorician Kenneth Burke shows that national tragedies and death are rhetorically significant because they disrupt the faith that society has in itself ("Language as Symbolic Action" 15). During this time, narrative analysis can help reveal underlying social values and morals, as well as how these paradigms are being used to stabilize society. Studying the ways in which society responded to 9/11, Kitch discovered that "during the first few weeks after the disaster, a set of themes emerged through which Americans 'understood' what had happened. Those themes included courage, sacrifice, faith, redemption, and patriotism" ("Mourning in America" 213). Moreover, looking at several cases of national tragedy, Panti and Sumiala contend that "grief becomes a major form of nation-building" (127). They instruct the critic to investigate public tragedies for their illumination of the "sacred centre" which the authors explain, "refers first to the central values system and second to the authoritative institutions and persons who often express or embody the central value system."

These symbolic centres are ‘sacred’ in the sense that they deal with core values and beliefs” (Pantti and Sumiala 123). They argue that once society is confronted with misfortune, it typically attempts to reinstate the status-quo by relying on commonly held traditions and values. These social values and ideas are often articulated through media outlets because “[e]xtraordinary, dramatic events offer a place where the media can position itself as the protector of societal values and cultural identities” (Pantti and Wieten 302). Thus, by examining media outlets, governmental officials, and other sources of popular national opinion, the critic is able to discover the underlying assumptions and beliefs that are considered to be of the highest importance to a society in mourning.

Although scholars tend to choose either to analyze the internal structure of narrative or to study its external function, these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, some researchers have offered critical methods that incorporate both views to create a more holistic value of narrative criticism. Shenhav’s 2005 essay proposes what he calls “thin” and “thick” narrative analysis. Initially, thin analysis “refers to analysis of the organization of events in the narrative, or any analysis dealing with structural aspects of events’ organization in the narrative” (87). Thin analysis is congruent with Fisher’s ideas of narrative probability, along with other suggestions to look at time and organization in the text of the story. On the other hand, thick analysis is “concerned with an aggregate of components involved mainly in the storytelling process, or ‘narration,’ and the relation between them and the components of the thin narrative. A thick analysis also includes the study of characterization and ‘focalization’” (Shenhav 87). Furthermore, as Shenhav shows, thick analysis is also useful for looking at the broader “popular political view” and context that give rise to particular narratives (93). Thus, his model allows the critic to look at both internal and external components of the narrative.

Following Shenhav's example, in this study I investigate the internal and external elements of the Tillman narrative to uncover its form and function. Internally, particular focus is directed toward the established themes within the timeline as advocated by Arthur Asa Berger. Externally, this thesis examines the Tillman narrative through the application of Pantti and Sumialia's concept of the "sacred centre." One goal of this thesis is to identify the ways that the Tillman narrative helped the U.S. populace to make sense of tragedy and war. Therefore, the study will also aim to place the death narrative into the larger political context as suggested by Kitch and Shenhav.

### Hegemonic Masculinity and Sport Culture

The second methodological perspective for this thesis derives from communication research dedicated to hegemonic-masculinity and sport culture. Although these two areas are by no means synonymous with one another, scholarship shows that masculinity and sport are highly interconnected. As cultural critical Nick Trujillo notes, "[p]erhaps no single institution in American culture has influenced our sense of masculinity more than sport" (292). Tillman's status as a football hero and symbol of traditional manhood provides grounds for exploring the ways that hegemonic masculinity and sport intersect as well as providing insight into the ways that these values were potentially used to facilitate governmental goals.<sup>17</sup>

The field of masculinity studies is still in its infancy, and scholars have been working to develop the purpose of the discipline.<sup>18</sup> According to masculinity scholars Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt, the concept of hegemonic masculinity, first developed in the 1980s,

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<sup>17</sup> The term "sports" is more than just the plural form of "sport." "Sports" refers to specific games such as football and basketball, while "sport" is more holistic and denotes the cultural and social action of collecting for the purpose of playing games.

<sup>18</sup> For an extensive review of hegemonic masculinity research see Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt's "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19 (2005): 829-59; and Harry Brod's "The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies," Boston: Allen and Unwin 1987.

emerged from research on social inequality in Australian high schools and was understood to be “the pattern of practice that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (832).

However, some critics have remarked that hegemonic masculinity transcends overt oppression revealing socially constructed concepts of desired male characteristics as well. In this study I rely on the definition of hegemonic masculinity used by Connell as the “culturally idealized form of masculine character” to explain how Tillman’s death narrative was used to mirror the American form of masculinity (“An Iron Man” 83). In keeping with hegemonic masculinity I posit that, the governmental narrative of Tillman’s death positioned the football star as an exemplar of masculinity

The pre-eminent study connecting hegemonic masculinity and sport in the communication studies discipline is Trujillo’s 1991 investigation into media representations of baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan. In that piece, Trujillo argues that masculinity becomes hegemonic “when it is widely accepted in a culture and when that acceptance reinforces the dominant gender ideology of the culture” (290). After looking at the media representations of Ryan, Trujillo identifies five common themes of hegemonic masculinity found in American culture: 1) physical force and control, 2) occupational achievement, 3) familial patriarchy, 4) frontiersmanship, and 5) heterosexuality (291).

The first theme is that masculinity is strongly connected with physical force and control as conceptions of power. Typically, U.S. culture emphasizes physical strength when differentiating between genders. Particularly in male dominated sports such as football, physical force and superiority are manifested through violent competition. While studying the socialization of youth through sport, journalism and feminism researcher Lucy Komisar argues, “[t]he differences between boys and girls are defined in terms of violence” (133). Within sport,

to symbolize the vitality of society our nation holds men in high regard who have mythic-like strength. Historian Leo Braudy argues that dating back to the Greek Olympics there has been a discursive connection between the “health of the male body with the health of the national body” (340). While studying the home run race in 1998, critical cultural critic Michael L. Butterworth discovered that media representation of Mark McGwire was constructed “through a fascination with McGwire’s size and strength” (47). The ideal strength of men is often held in contrast to the weaker female body. For example, as sociologist Michael Messner comments, the game of “[f]ootball, based as it is upon the most extreme possibilities of the male body (muscular bulk, explosive power and aggression) is a world apart from women, who are relegated to the role of cheerleader/sex objects on the sidelines rooting their men on” (“Sports and Male Domination” 202). Thus, the physical vitality exemplified through sport is an essential component of the idolized masculine body and identity.

A Second theme is that hegemonic masculinity is represented through career success. According to Trujillo, “masculinity is hegemonic when it is defined through occupational achievement in an industrial capitalistic society” (291). When examining the framing of Ryan, Trujillo found that multiple references in the form of baseball statistics were made to quantify Ryan’s occupational success. For those not participating in organized sports, this tenant of masculinity is often defined by the ability to provide for the family. Messner identifies a “breadwinner ethic” common with masculinity, where men consider themselves responsible for the economic sustainability of the family (“The Meaning of Success” 205). This masculine theme therefore creates a division of labor in which men are required to work outside the home, while women must remain economically dependent “as mothers and housekeepers” (Messner

“The Meaning of Success” 205). Ultimately, cultural and social expectations of masculinity require that men must excel in the work place in order to be “successful” men.

Third, hegemonic masculinity is patriarchal in that it perpetuates male domination over women and children. For example, Trujillo notes that ideal fathers are typically described in terms of “family protectors” or “strong father figures,” whereas women are personified as “sexual objects” and “nurturing mothers” (291). Ironically, men are often admired for occasionally possessing caring feminine features, while women are lauded for adopting the male role of advisor or protector (Trujillo 291). Historically, our social culture has not viewed men and women as peers. Hegemonic masculinity illustrates the prevailing social emphasis of traditional male patriarchy over women and children.

A fourth theme is that hegemonic masculinity is represented by frontiersmanship. As Trujillo explains, “masculinity is hegemonic as symbolized by the daring, romantic frontiersman of yesteryear and of the present-day outdoorsman” (291). Masculine heroes are almost always referred to as rugged individualists who must represent good against evil. For example, frequent representations of Nolan Ryan characterized the baseball player as a law man in the old-west. The male as frontiersman is also often connected with the myth of the “white man’s burden” whereas a western hero is in charge of conquering the uncivilized natives in the name of white progress (Holland 42). When studying the Bush Administration’s war time rhetoric, communication and sociology scholars Sue Curry Jansen and Don Sabo contend that the use of sports metaphors were aimed to motivate white males to “flex their muscles” and go “kick some ass” (8). The relation of myth and masculinity is discussed in greater detail in the final section of the literature review below.

Finally, masculinity is defined by heterosexuality. Although Messner has noted the implicit homoeroticism in many sport rituals, such as the slapping of the buttocks for congratulations, the iconic masculine figure is viewed as firmly heterosexual (“Sports and Male Domination” 202). Masculinity requires that men “not [be] effeminate in physical appearance or mannerisms” and be successful in “sexual relationships with women” (Trujillo 292). In a heteronormative society, the ideal man cannot be associated with homosexual attributes.

Of course, most men are incapable of embodying and projecting all of the tenets of hegemonic masculinity as defined by Trujillo and others. As noted by Connell and Messerschmidt, “[e]arly criticism of the concept raised the questions of who actually represents hegemonic masculinity” (838). One answer accepted by scholars is that hegemonic masculinity occurs through the popularization of certain hyper-masculine figures. In their 2005 study, Connell and Messerschmidt assert that, “hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity (e.g., sports stars), symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to that” (846). Thus, masculine sports figures are often hegemonic masculine symbols who are emulated and elevated by many of those in society. Trujillo concludes that the media representations of hegemonic masculinity personalize “models or heroes worthy of adoration and emulation” (293). As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, by being an elite football player and soldier, Tillman’s masculinity was a key part of the government and news media’s representation of him as an American hero.

Along with the connection between sport and masculinity, scholarship has also revealed a strong connection between sport culture, hegemonic masculinity, and the promotion of warfare. According to historian Leo Braudy:

Crucial to the development of sports was, first, the model of military discipline, the rhythms of male bodies working together. But even more essential was the increasing

moralization of sports, the way in which individuals subordinated themselves and their ambition to the needs of the group and the code of fair play. (341)

Moreover, the rhetorical connection between sport and war was given specific consideration by sociologists Sue Jansen and Don Sabo, in their 1994 analysis of the Persian Gulf War. They found that there are stark similarities in the ways that sport and war are discussed in society:

The mixing of metaphors of sport and war played a historically unique social, rhetorical, and ideological role during the Persian Gulf War. The traditional homologous relationship between sport and war provided government, the military, the sport industry, and mass media with an easily mobilized and highly articulated semiotic system and set cultural values to advance and justify their respective plans, actions, and interests. (1)

The authors show that this advancement of interests is done in part through the enactment of common language. For example, coaches and players often use words such as “battle-plan” and “war” to describe the events of a game, while at the same time military leaders use common sport rhetoric such as “teamwork” and “plays” to describe military action. With this intermixing of terminology as sport sociologist Samantha King notes, “it becomes increasingly hard within U.S. national culture to discern where the war ends and the games begin and, more crucially, why we are playing in the first place” (538). Ultimately, the connection between sport and war has the potential to lead to an oversimplification of the causes of military action, a desensitization of war’s true costs, and the exploitation of athletes as “vehicle[s] for mobilizing support for the war” (Jansen and Sabo 3). The rhetorical and physical connections between sport and war, act in part to glorify conflict and reinforce male dominance in society. Throughout American history, militarization and sport have had a large impact on the very conception of masculinity. According to Kumar, “[o]ne of the bastions of hyper masculinity in a sexist society, the military constructs male identity as being predicated on violence and combat. This stands in contrast to the notion of women as passive, away from the battlefield” (“War Propaganda” 298). Thus, Kumar shows that the military has played a major role in defining masculinity and keeping

strict gender segregation. The ideal military soldier, needed for protection and pursuit of national interest, is traditionally seen as a strong, violent man. In contrast, militarization has fostered the view that women should be removed from conflict.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the past twenty years, the interconnection between sport and warfare has deepened. In her 2008 study concerning the synergy of sport metaphor and perpetual war, King argues that since 9/11 “there is an intensified depth and mutuality to the sport-war nexus, a shift that is indicative of the militarization of everyday life and, simultaneously, of the sportification of political life, in contemporary United States” (527). King contends that the rhetoric of warfare has now been applied to everyday life through the medium of sport. Her research indicates that the national obsession with sport is often exploited for domestic support of military ventures. For example, by working in tandem with the NFL:

The Bush administration [George W. Bush] builds a supportive audience for its military ventures through an association with a brand that draws more fans on a weekly basis than a presidential election draws voters once every 4 years and in which the NFL develops its markets by association with a presidency. (King 535)

King’s findings indicate that sport and militarization often rely on one other for collective audiences and financial support. Thus, war becomes more popular in part because of its association with sport.

Additionally, the interplay of sport and warfare has far reaching implications for the ability of domestic audiences to resist warfare. Along with the metaphor’s influence in making the real impact of war difficult to comprehend, the sport-war nexus acts to silence dissent. Jansen and Sabo explain:

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<sup>19</sup> In the past twenty years the U.S. military has made improvements with regard to the integration of women into the armed services. However, the prevalent social perception dictates that the battlefield is not a suitable place for women. For more discussion on the role on gender and sex in the U.S. military see Deepa Kumar’s “War Propaganda and the (Ab)Uses of Women: Media Construction of the Jessica Lynch Story,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (2004): 297-313. Kumar argues, through the case study of Jessica Lynch, that there is little role for femininity in the military. As she illustrates, female soldiers are typically successful only when they portray traditional masculine qualities.

Gridiron imagery was used to deflect the public's attention away from the real horrors of war by rallying support for the 'home team.' As a propaganda device, sport/war bandwagoneering proved doubly productive: Sports were used to promote the war and the war was used to promote sports, especially the Super Bowl. (7)

Furthermore, the rhetorical focus on the "home team" can have a polarizing effect, making any middle ground seem impossible. Sporting tropes make criticism of war difficult as protest appears to "cut both across and against the grains of sport, gender, and patriotism" (Jansen and Sabo 12). Hence, dissent against the war can sometimes be framed as an obscene and ridiculous condemnation of both sport and country.

Another aspect of masculinity and sport to which communication researchers attend to is that both are used to perpetuate desired social norms and values. As King comments, American football is "a well-established vehicle for the circulation of dominant norms and values" (528). In particular, scholars have focused on two common norms usually reinforced by sport: white nationalism and strict gender separation. In his 2007 study into the role of white cultural nationalism in the United States after 9/11, sport studies researcher Kyle W. Kusz argues that cultural conservatives and neo-liberals "capitalized on the unfortunate events of 9/11 as rationale and justification for forwarding a domestic White cultural nationalism whose implicit intent is, at least partially, to resecure a centered and normative position for White masculinity" (77). Kusz contends that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were seen by many white leaders and ordinary citizens as a challenge to the dominance and superiority of male whiteness since the perpetrators were non-white. The Middle Eastern terrorists were not only successful in attacking the U.S., but also equally important for the soundness of the American psyche, white leaders were unable to stop the attack. A fundamentalist revitalization of whiteness was one response to the attack against the U.S. by those of Middle Eastern dissent. As Kusz explains, hyper-masculine rhetoric employed by the Bush Administration:

Was not only used as the cultural conduit to drum up popular support for the war on terror, but it simultaneously played a key role in setting the stage to initiate the racial project to re-secure a central and normative position for White masculinity in American culture and society in the name of patriotism and love of country. (79)

According to Kusz, the national emphasis on predominantly white sports, such as NASCAR, and white heroes, such as Tillman, helped to reestablish white figures as individuals of worth in a time of uncertainty. Butterworth concludes that “hegemonic masculinity becomes yet another vehicle through which whiteness is affirmed in everyday cultural practices” (232). Even in sports where whites are in the minority such as basketball, Kusz maintains, black athletes are habitually portrayed as spoiled and criminal, while white athletes are described as selfless and moral (86). As a result, hegemonic masculinity and sport reinforce the prevailing idea that admirable social figures are white males.

During times of national change hegemonic masculinity and sport also work to maintain strict gender boundaries. Masculinity critic Harry Brod contends that changes in contemporary gender roles have made “our present historical period [...] particularly tumultuous for men” (15). The male dominated realms of sport and war have both resisted changes in the social fabric. Jansen and Sabo maintain that “sport/war tropes are crucial rhetorical resources for mobilizing the patriarchal values that construct, mediate, maintain, and, when necessary, reform or repair hegemonic forms of masculinity”(1). With specific reference to football, Messner argues that “[i]t is likely that the rise of football as ‘America’s number-one game’ is largely a result of the comforting clarity it provides between the polarities of traditional male power, strength, and violence and the contemporary fears of social feminization” (“The Meaning of Success” 196). When the cultural rules surrounding gender become blurred, the stern regulations of sport can offer clarity for a potentially confused male public.

One such instance of socialized masculine repair took place in the 1970s. The emergence of what is now referred to as the second wave feminist movement, and a major military defeat in Vietnam created challenges to the role of masculinity in American society not seen since World War II, when women were asked to enter the work force. In response to these new challenges, conditions within American culture helped to develop narratives which reinforced traditional patriarchy and the nuclear family. Women's studies researcher Susan Jeffords argues in her work outlining the remasculization of America in the wake of the Vietnam War, that explanations for defeat in Vietnam were directed towards a feminization of American culture.

According to Jeffords:

Established as victims--of their government, the war, the Vietnamese, American protesters, and the women's movement--Vietnam veterans are portrayed in contemporary American culture as emblems of an unjustly discriminated masculinity. Through this image of the veteran, American manhood is revived, regenerated principally by a rejection of the feminine and sexuality; reborn and purified, the veteran takes his place as an experienced leader and spokesperson for a conjointly revived morality and social politics that will regenerate America itself. (116)

Thus, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War new efforts were directed by those in power to rebuild a battered male patriarchy and maintain gender separation in the United States.

Of the hegemonic masculinity and sport culture literature previously discussed, in this study I utilize Trujillo's tenets of physical force, occupational achievement, and familiar patriarchy to study the public characterization of Tillman by the government and news media. Further, drawing on the research of King and Jansen-Sabo, this thesis focuses on the nexus of sport/war found in the Tillman death narrative. Finally, relying on the research done by Kusz and Jeffords, this research inspects the relation between the death narrative and contemporary War on Terror, for the glorification of white hegemonic masculinity and gender separation in American society

## Frontier Myth and Public Memory

The final analytical lens employed in this rhetorical analysis of Tillman's death narrative is the use of the Frontier Myth and public memory. Despite being autonomous theoretical perspectives, both myth and public memory are highly interdependent concepts in the field of communication studies. The creation of myth helps to generate and facilitate public memory, while public memory perpetuates the integration of mythology in contemporary society.

Historian George Lipsitz explains, “[t]he nature of ‘heroic’ action, the inevitability of conflict, and the march of progress have been portrayed in popular culture over and over again” (33).

When these stories are told and retold, Kitch asserts, “those narratives become collective memory and, in some cases myth. Like narrative, myth gives meaning to individual news events by placing them within a broader temporal and cultural structure and therefore, making them seem logical” (“A Death in the American Family” 296). Kitch illustrates that our society makes sense of reality by relying on both myth and public memory. The embodiment of prevailing social values by myth and memory helps to create the ontological foundation for society to build unity. As rhetorician Barbie Zelizer notes, “[m]emory has connected us with the larger world on many levels, linking the lived with the folkloric, the children of tomorrow with the ancestors of yesteryear, the personal lives of individuals with the shared experiences of the collective” (“Reading the Past” 214). Consequently, both myth and public memory function by emphasizing the past, in order to give meaning to previous, present, and future action.

The emphasis on the formation of national consent is a reoccurring theme in the study of myth and public memory. Few things exist in society which all people typically can share together to create collective understanding, but the interactive process of myth has the potential to weave society together. Thus, communication scholar Leroy Dorsey contends that myths

which are passed down through the generations “constitute an essential community-building force. They bridge differences and promote commonality among human beings by framing their [teller or listeners’] reality in an almost mystical way” (4). Furthermore, even though myths are associated with fiction, they are not without the power to manufacture connection and meaning. Historian Garry Wills argues that even though myths are centered in fiction, they do represent important social truths:

A myth does not take hold without expressing many truths--misleading truths, usually, but important ones: truth, for one thing, to the needs of those who elaborate and accept the myth; truth to the demand for some control over complex realities; truth to the recognition of shared values. (26)

As these scholars suggest, an important role for the critic is to examine the way that myth and public memory manufacture “truth” to create community.

When studying myth in rhetorical criticism, researchers have attempted to demystify the underlying components and structures of mythology. At its core, myth is a special type of narrative with its own distinctive characteristics. In his study of the use of myth in Dr. Seuss’s *Lorax*, rhetorician Dylan Wolfe argues, “[a]s a branch of narrative criticism, mythic analysis is not as invested in the use of myth to identify the universals of human consciousness [...] but rather attempts to identify the use and evolution of myths in discourse” (12). To help map the use and evolution of myth in discourse, public address scholar Leroy Dorsey has made great strides toward identifying the essence of myth. In their 2003 study of Theodore Roosevelt’s use of myth in his presidential addresses, Leroy Dorsey and Rachel Harlow outline three common characteristics found in myth: “A myth captures its audience’s attention and influences its thinking with three basic elements: the universe, the protagonist, and the narrative” (62). The universe of the myth depicts the background in which the story takes place, and the context that is created by the universe is what gives the protagonist his or her motivation to act. Moreover,

every myth is heavily reliant on the protagonist, or hero, to create identification with the audience. Dorsey and Harlow explain how the hero's "struggles in the universe define the type of behavior necessary for survival in both the universe and in the 'real' world that it represents" (62). As a cultural exemplar, the hero teaches society through his or her actions which strengths and skills are needed in the real world to become successful. Finally, the narrative describes the relationship between the hero and the setting, which historian Richard Slotkin maintains establishes "laws of cause and effect, of natural process, and of morality" (8-9). The narrative is the "telling" of the myth, in which the tale connects the hero's moral decisions to responses in the universe. These three elements offer a method for analyzing myth in narrative discourse. By identifying these parts of myth, the critic is able to map the ways that myths are constructed and change over time.

Over the history of humankind, thousands of myths have been created to explain our place in history. However, one myth with particular resonance for the United States, and this thesis, is the Frontier Myth.<sup>20</sup> Originally articulated in scholarship by Fredrick Jackson Turner's analysis of the role of frontiersmen in manifest destiny, the Frontier Myth according to rhetorician Ronald Carpenter "is omnipresent in this country's popular culture" (117). As with many myths, the Frontier Myth is a story of epic beginnings and promising futures. It is the story of America's taming of the wild frontier through the help of rugged individualists. Following traditional mythic structure as outlined by Dorsey, "[t]he conqueror (hero), the frontier (universe), and their interaction (narrative) constitute the three basic structural elements of the Frontier Myth" (5). Initially, the universe of the Frontier Myth takes place in the dangerous, wild, and untamed frontier of nature. Memory scholar and mythic critic Janice

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<sup>20</sup> The frontier myth predates the formation of the United States and is popularly known to have begun with the Puritan's errand into the wilderness, a justification employed to occupy North American territory and colonize Native peoples on the continent.

Hocker Rushing contends that this setting is of great importance to American ideas of self-identity: “From birth to maturity, America has drawn upon the frontier for its mythic identity. Whether fixed upon Columbus sailing the ocean blue or Buffalo Bill conquering the Wild, Wild West, the American imagination remains fascinated by new and unknown places” (“Mythic Evolution” 265). From this mythic perspective, the social and cultural conception of America has been framed around the danger and potential of the unknown frontier.

Furthermore, the frontier setting has a large impact on the goals and characteristics of the protagonist in the myth. According to Rushing, “[t]o cope with the harshness and savagery of the frontier environment, he [frontiersman] must above all be a rugged individualist” who must work to “settle and civilize the frontier” (“American Western Myth” 16). As is the case with hegemonic masculinity, rugged individualism is a dominant component of the hero’s personality because “[i]f he [the hero] does not manifest rugged individualism in all of his crucial actions, he cannot be a hero” (16). In a rough and dangerous environment, weakness cannot be tolerated, let alone glorified. In the original Frontier Myth, the role of protagonist was played by white cowboys, trappers, and lawmen who used their self-reliance to overcome great adversity and challenge evil. Thus, the implication of the myth is clear: the solution to a dangerous rugged landscape is a hero with an equally imposing personality. The only people with the skill to “tame” the wild must themselves be wild.

Finally, rhetorical scholarship has also outlined the narration of the Frontier Myth as a form of drama. In her study of Ronald Reagan’s speech calling for the creation of a missile defense shield during the Cold War, Rushing argues that when confronted with the challenges of the frontier, the frontiersman or cowboy “elevates his ego, represented as rugged individualism, to such prominence that he cannot live in community” (417). In this first stage, the hero must

strike out on his own to confront directly the evils of the wild, leaving behind the comforts of home and community. In the second, faced with challenges for which “he is woefully ill-equipped,” our champion learns from his or her experiences to become stronger and wiser (417). In this stage, armed with the knowledge from his or her previous actions, the mythic hero will either succeed in defeating evil, or perishes. Of course, the mythic hero succeeds, almost without exception. Thus, the third stage occurs according to Rushing when a “reintegrated hero becomes consubstantial with the infinite scene he or she occupies and dissolves the dialectic between hero and enemy” (417). Finally, the hero becomes the master of the environment for the benefit of the community he or she was forced to leave. Dorsey and Harlow summarize by explaining that after the hero leaves the comfort of home and overcomes great danger, he or she is able to return to the aid of society as a whole (65). Within this dramatic frame, the frontiersmen were not risking their lives for cheap thrills or their own personal gain. Instead, the myth maintains they risked their lives conquering the wilderness, so that society as a whole could prosper and develop.

The above discussion outlines the public memory of the traditional components of the Frontier Myth. Yet, myths must be adapted over time to maintain their persuasiveness in face of changing societal norms and expectations. Scholars have studied how myths adapt over time by exploring ways that the Frontier Myth has been modified by former U.S. Presidents for persuasive purposes. Rhetorical researchers Mark West and Chris Carey argue that since the days of Theodore Roosevelt, “[t]he presidential deployment of defining cultural myths is one of the most effective ways of harnessing consent” (383). One element that is constantly changing in the Frontier Myth is the conception of the “Frontier.” With the American West now firmly conquered, new frontiers have been created to capture the imagination of the American public.

Rushing explains that “America has constantly sought new frontiers as the old are tamed, and as long as it has found them, has preserved the backdrop of its identity even as drama has evolved” (“Mythic Evolution” 266). For example, Rushing notes that in President Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars speech, the President adapted the traditional concepts of the frontier to that of outer space.<sup>21</sup> The use of space for national security objectives became a new frontier, holding adventure, mystery, and possible glory for America.<sup>22</sup>

Alterations to the Frontier Myth have also been made toward the conception of the protagonist. In another study of the variation of the Frontier Myth, Dorsey shows how Theodore Roosevelt attempted to depict the average American farmer as the archetypal hero in order to persuade the nation to embrace conservation (3). While still focusing on rugged individualism, Roosevelt highlighted the great patience, morality, and selflessness of the American farmer as characteristics to be replicated by the rest of society.

In a more contemporary example of such research, West and Carey’s 2006 study of the use of the Frontier Myth by the Bush Administration revealed that President George W. Bush and Vice-President Cheney manipulated physical space to embody rugged individualism and the Frontier Myth. Their study found “[t]he setting, characters, and actions of the frontier narrative were able to shift and morph depending on the tactical needs of the White House. But the core of the rhetorical vision remained firmly anchored in its motivation: pragmatic, politics based in a moral tale” (401). Specifically, West and Carey found that the rhetorical emphasis the Bush

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<sup>21</sup> On March 23, 1983, then President Ronald Reagan, proposed his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). This land and air based missile defense shield was put into development in hopes of deterring enemy nations from attack and intercepting nuclear weapons fired on the United States. Critics of the policy argued that the available technology was not adequate and called Reagan’s proposal “Star Wars,” a reference to the 1977 science fiction movie by George Lucas.

<sup>22</sup> Of course President Reagan was not the first individual, or even U.S President, to set America’s sight towards the stars. John F. Kennedy’s legacy continues to be defined by his pledge to reach the moon by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rushing is not arguing that Reagan invented his own interstellar frontier, but rather, that Reagan maintained many essential rhetorical components of the Frontier Myth, while simultaneously adapting the myth to match his own political objectives.

administration placed on Bush's Texas ranch as symbol of the President's traditional values was a tactic to create political space separate from the negative connotation of Capital Hill and Washington elitism. These studies indicate that the critic must be aware of the way that myths are modified by the rhetor for political purposes. Also, Rushing suggests that the critic gives more attention to "how myths change structurally--that is, how changes in one element affect the mythic whole" ("Mythic Evolution" 269). Both Roosevelt and Bush kept the essence of the Frontier Myth intact, despite making considerable modifications. Thus, myth is often called upon by leaders as an instrument of political persuasion.

The changes made to myths have a direct impact on public memory. Since myths are specific narratives about the past which impact understanding of the present and future, they are best understood alongside public memory. When a myth is told or changed, journalism critic Jill Edy asserts it is the communication process that "transcends the psychological aspects of memory and makes the concept sociological" (72). Neither myth nor public memory can exist in isolation; rather, they require constant communicative interaction to exist. Paradoxically, the interaction that gives birth to myth and public memory is what leads to their dynamic modification.

In her review of the study of public memory, Zelizer outlines six premises of collective remembering for the critic to bear in mind during his or her analysis.<sup>23</sup> First, public memory is processual. People normally think of memory as a "thing," or a biological product, instead of as a process. However, Zelizer insists "remembering is no longer seen as a finite activity, with an

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<sup>23</sup> There is one particular vocabulary discretion in scholarship concerning memory. Early scholars, including Zelizer and Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, used the term "collective memory" when discussing the social process of discussing the past. However, more recent scholarship employs the term "public memory" in order to represent the thought that memory is multifaceted and contested in public spaces. The argument is that there is not one "collective" memory but rather multiple memories that battle for dominance within public discourses and monuments. For this study, I use the term public memory to reflect the most recent research.

identifiable beginning and end. Rather, it is seen as a process that is constantly unfolding, changing, and transforming” (218). Memory is not accidental, nor purely biological; instead, there are steps and methods through which memory is molded.

Second, public memory is unpredictable. Instead of being linear, public memory can at times be illogical and circular. Some portions of public memory often contradict historical facts established by historians; nevertheless, the memory of what happened is often more powerful than what actually took place. Rhetoricians Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles explain, “[h]istory is a record of events, while collective memory is the ‘depository of traditions’ where a culture or community comes to understand the events of the past” (421). The ways that societies work to create memory, as well as the memories themselves, are nearly impossible to predict.

Third, public memory is partial, since “[n]o single memory contains all that we know, or could know about any given event, personality, or issue. Rather, memories are often pieced together like a mosaic” (Zelizer “Reading the Past” 244). For the critic to determine public memory, investigation must take multiple avenues and consult various sources, rather than just one location.

Fourth, public memory is “useable.” Zelizer clarifies that “collective memory is always a means to something else. Rather than be taken at face value, as a simple act of recall, Zelizer says, public memory is evaluated for the ways in which it helps us to make connections to each other over time and space to ourselves” (“Reading the Past” 266). Memory is political in nature and is often used by those in power to guide future political action. In their definition of public memory, rhetoricians David Schulz and Mitchell Reyes contend that public memory is “understood as the mobilization of the past for present needs. This is especially true following

collective trauma, after which societies often retreat to familiar and traditional modes of remembrance” (633). Furthermore, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles maintain:

Strategically, collective memory becomes a powerful tool in the rhetorical repertoire of leaders striving for electoral and political ascendancy. Collective memory works as an interpretive strategy for the definition of political image, as political actors seek to link their character to familiar and secure markers of collective identity drawn from the community’s shared past. (419)

In their analysis of former President Bill Clinton’s August 28, 1998, commemoration of the March on Washington, Parry-Giles and Parry Giles identify a particular memory strategy they call “political nostalgia” which they describe as “the limited, distorted narrative of the past-in-memory that argumentatively resurfaces and glorifies bygone times and is communicated to achieve an emotional response in the service of a political or electoral goal” (420). Therefore, by referencing beloved memories and heroes, leaders have the ability to boost their own ethos in hopes of gaining approval from the public.

Fifth, Zelizer argues that public memory is both particular and universal. Paradoxically, memory is particular to specific events but simultaneously widespread since it is a commonly accepted by many members in society. However, to act as public memory, the differences in individual recollections must also follow repeating themes and understandings at the macro-level. In other words, one person’s memory alone cannot constitute public memory, yet it is individual memories that work to form collective memory.

Finally, public memory is material, in that it “exists in the world rather than in a person’s head and so is embodied in different cultural forms. We find memory in objects, narratives about the past, even the routines by which we structure our day” (Zelizer “Reading the Past” 232). Memories can be found in discourse as well as public monuments dedicated to remembering an

event. These six premises illustrate the ways in which public memory acts organically, rather than statically.

With public memory being partial, processual, and simultaneously particular and universal, one major challenge for communication scholars has been finding methods to isolate the public memory surrounding an event. Many academics have looked at public spaces, such as memorials and museums to ascertain public memory<sup>24</sup>, but these methods have limited application for this thesis since access to physical representations of Tillman was not possible.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, this thesis relies on references made about Tillman in newspapers, magazines, books, and the internet to examine public memory. Kitch has argued that mass media has a special place in public memory studies. Newspapers and magazine both craft memory, and reflect it upon society. During the public reaction to the death of Kennedy, Jr., Kitch notes, the news media's reporting became a type of national ritual interweaving myth and memory in a socialized bereavement process ("A Death in the American Family" 298). When public memory is discovered, analysis can take place by focusing on the ways that rhetors tap into or violate memory. In 2008, Schulz and Reyes analyzed the ways that controversial University of Colorado Professor Ward Churchill drew condemnation by violating the collective memory of 9/11 terrorist attacks. After examining reoccurring themes in the reporting of 9/11 found in mass

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<sup>24</sup> Anyone interested in the study of public spaces and monuments should start with Carole Blair et al.'s "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99 (1991): 263-88. Another foundational study in public displays of memory is Blair and Neil's analysis of the AIDS memorial quilt in "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10 (2007): 595-626. For more research on the study of museums and monuments see Jason Edward Black's "Memories of the Alabama Creek War, 1813-1814: U.S. Governmental and Native Identities at the Horseshoe Bend National Military Park," *The American Indian Quarterly* 33 (2009): 200-99.

<sup>25</sup> Currently the predominate physical monuments to Tillman include 1.) the Arizona Cardinals' "Ring of Honor" outside the University of Phoenix Stadium , 2.) A plaque in his hometown of New Almaden, California, and 3.) the Pat Tillman United Service Organization (USO) Center along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. I was unable to visit these monuments physically, which made some memory research methods moot. However, these monuments are included in the analysis whenever they were mentioned by the government or mass media.

media, the authors were able to elucidate examples of Professor Churchill's violation of the prevalent memory of 9/11 with his interpretation of what occurred.

As researchers have mapped changes to public memory, some have highlighted deliberate modifications to history and have questioned why such changes occur. The absence of information in public memory is also a part of rhetorical interest. According to Zelizer, forgetting is not accidental but instead is “a choice to put aside, for whatever reasons, what no longer matters” (“Reading the Past” 220). Deciding what does and does not matter is contingent largely on the specific culture evaluating past events and the context of their current needs. Historian David Lowenthal asserts, “[t]he most compelling motive for altering the past is to change the present--to ward off global catastrophe, to secure national hegemony, to make one’s own fame or fortune” (27). Therefore, the reconstruction of the past has a direct impact on the way the success is evaluated. In a fascinating analysis of the public memory of former President Abraham Lincoln, sociologist Barry Schwartz finds that “Lincoln’s image changed after his assassination not only because he was the object for whose sake these rituals were enacted but also because of the people’s perception of the ritual themselves” (356). Schwartz clarifies that although we contemporarily view Lincoln with universal reference, the president was extremely controversial up to the day of his death by the north and south alike. The prevailing memory of Lincoln was not adapted based on his actions alone, but rather; on the ways those actions coincided with the public memory of his assassination.

When studying the representation of Tillman by the Bush administration, military, and news media, this thesis applied the previous research on the Frontier Myth developed by Rushing, Dorsey, and West /Carey. The analysis identified the mythic structure and dramatism within the Tillman death narrative. Furthermore, I examined how the Tillman myth departs from

other Frontier Myths and was possibly used to mobilize public action and build consent for the War on Terror. As the mythic structure was examined, I applied Zelizer's conceptualization of public memory as "useable," along with the Parry-Giles' notion of "political nostalgia" to argue that the rhetoric of the Tillman death narrative mirrored governmental goals and ideology. Finally, relying on the work of Shulz and Reyes the study mapped the evolution of the memory of Tillman and its meaning for the American public. With the methodological foundation now laid out, this thesis continues by providing an in-depth examination of the Tillman death narrative through the rhetorical lens of narrative criticism.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “NO FINER EPITHET”: A NARRATIVE OF SACRIFICE AND VIOLENCE

Through the use of Fisher’s theory of narrative analysis, this first analytical chapter illuminates the form and function of the Pat Tillman death narrative. Here, I begin by placing the Tillman death narrative within the political context occurring at the time of its construction in order to comprehend the exigencies for such a representation by those in the government, military, and news media. Then, this study attempts to recognize the prominent components and themes occurring in the death narrative. By exploring the dominant elements of the narrative, it is then possible to extract prevailing social values which comprise what Pantti and Sumiala call the “Sacred Centre.” From this analysis, I conclude that the Tillman narrative illustrated the importance of sacrifice and violence as governing American values during times of war.

After discussing the Sacred Centre, I reveal how the exclusion of important facts and events impacted the Tillman death narrative’s symbolic significance. Finally, I explore the probable influence of the Tillman death narrative on the public conceptualization of the U.S. War on Terror. I argue that the discourse of the death narrative likely bolstered public support for war in three primary ways. First, the Tillman death narrative was ciphered to extend the events of 9/11 and establish a feeling of guilt with the public. Second, the Tillman death narrative’s rhetoric became a conduit to transfer morality from Tillman’s actions to the military, President George W. Bush, and War on Terror. Finally, Tillman’s death narrative was potentially a catalyst for war by constructing an oversimplified and glorified depiction of warfare. Indeed,

these three rhetorical components were highly interconnected and overlapping. However, I pull them apart for the purposes of clarity and in-depth description.

#### Political Context: The Difficult Month of April, 2004

Even for the purposes of analysis, it is indeed impossible to extract a narrative from its political context, and the Tillman death narrative is no exception. In many ways the Tillman death narrative seemed to be largely a response to the political conditions facing the nation at the time of his death. The month of April 2004 proved to be a difficult month for both the Bush Administration as well as the U.S. military. Two specific events helped to cast doubt on the morality and effectiveness of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and Iraq: first, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, and second, the military failure in Fallujah.

On April 28, 2004, the television news program *60 Minutes II* aired a segment dedicated to alleged physical, sexual, and psychological damage that U.S. troops were inflicting on Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison. Dozens of images were shown of U.S. soldiers sexually humiliating and torturing naked Iraqi prisoners. The shocking reports quickly spread across the world, and the actions of the U.S. military at Abu Ghraib were condemned by the international community. According to the magazine *Frontline*, India's National magazine, of June 4, 2004, “[c]ondemnation the world over of large-scale human rights abuses committed by U.S.-led forces in Iraq and the continuing resistance to the occupation have further weakened the Bush Administration’s credibility and its control over the faster deteriorating situation” (Cherian 1). Moreover, *The Economist* of May 14, 2004, ran a cover-story calling for the resignation of then Department of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, with a picture of a hooded Iraqi being tortured.

The Abu Ghraib prison scandal was not just a public relations nightmare for the Bush Administration and U.S. military. More damagingly, Abu Ghraib dealt an immeasurable blow to the supposed moral righteousness of the war effort. The inhuman treatment by U.S. soldiers blurred the lines between good and evil, which forced many in the U.S. public to re-evaluate the virtue of supporting the War on Terror. *The Christian Science Monitor* of May 5, 2004, explained:

The Army's credibility as a force for good may be the only thing preventing mission failure in Iraq. The photos from Abu Ghraib prison do enrage. Truly disgusting are the minds – American minds! – that decided to put a hooded, helpless prisoner on a box and hook him up to electric wires [...] Goodbye, nobility. (Seaquist 1)

In many ways the Abu Ghraib revelation worked to strip the war of its ethical simplicity. The American public was repeatedly told that the War on Terror was vital for national survival and the humanitarian spread of democracy across the world. Yet, few parts of the Abu Ghraib scandal seemed to support the national interest. Rather, the unruly actions of certain individuals in the military made the ethical justifications of the war increasingly unstable.

The weakening moral indignation of the U.S. public toward the war in part created the exigency for the Tillman death narrative. With more people voicing their opposition to President Bush and the War on Terror, the Tillman death narrative gave institutional forces in the government and military the opportunity to guide society. In many ways, Tillman's death narrative became a panacea for the moral doubt created by Abu Ghraib. On May 12, 2004, *The Christian Science Monitor* ran a story in response to the use of torture by the U.S. military in which the newspaper bluntly asked if America had lost its way. The newspaper's answer was: "No [...] the spirit of America abroad is still better represented by Pat Tillman, the NFL player who gave his life in selfless service in Afghanistan, than by the twisted personalities whose inflicted, or ordered, such inhumane treatment of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib"(Hughes 1). In

this way, the altruistic actions portrayed in the Tillman death narrative stood to rhetorically repair a damaged American psyche and attempt to return morality to the American cause.

As if things were not going bad enough for U.S. forces, in April 2004, the military was faced with deteriorating conditions on the ground in Iraq. On March 31, 2004, Iraqi insurgents in the Iraqi city of Fallujah attacked a U.S. convey consisting of four American contractors.<sup>26</sup> After the four men were killed, an angry Iraqi mob desecrated their corpses, before hanging their charred remains over a bridge (Chan 1). With such imagery being disseminated throughout the news media, the story of Tillman's heroic death was considerably inspirational in comparison.

As one journalist noted, “[t]he war images in front of the public were awful. Remains of the bodies of American contractors working in Iraq were strung up in Fallujah just three weeks before Tillman's death” (Fish “An Un-American Tragedy” 8). When news spread of the attack on U.S. contractors, the military pledged a powerful response in order to gain control of Fallujah (Yacoub 1). Hence, on April 4, 2004, operations began to regain strategic control of the city by U.S. forces in the largest combat mission since Bush's declaration of “Mission Accomplished.”<sup>27</sup> The urban warfare that took place in the following days made advancement incredibly difficult for the Americans. Additionally, several accusations of possible human rights violations were directed toward the American side.<sup>28</sup> With U.S. casualties rising and victory slipping away,

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<sup>26</sup> The American contractors killed were employees of the controversial security corporation “Blackwater.” Blackwater is a privatized military company that has been hired by the US government on multiple occasions to provide additional military support. Critics argue that Blackwater is essentially a collection of mercenaries for hire that are not bound by international or national law. The company has been lambasted by human rights organizations and has been charged with multiple counts of misconduct including the murder of Iraqi civilians. For a more detailed examination into Blackwater's history and misconduct see Jeremy Scahill's 2008 book *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*.

<sup>27</sup> On May 1, 2003 President Bush delivered a speech on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln declaring the end of major combat operations in Iraq after the elimination of Sadaam Hussein's regime. However, Bush's declaration of “Mission Accomplished” did not coincide with the escalation of violence at the hands of Iraqi insurgents in the following years. Although the war against the Iraqi government ended in May 2003, the War in Iraq would continue past Bush's presidential exit in 2008.

<sup>28</sup> The U.S. military was accused of unnecessarily bombing hundreds of mosques, killing thousands of civilians, and using the illegal chemical White Phosphorus as an anti-personal weapon. For more research on possible human

American forces elected to withdraw from Fallujah on May 1, 2004.<sup>29</sup> This retreat was unquestionably a major blow to U.S. efforts in Iraq as it publicly illustrated the fallibility of the U.S military.

The contest over Fallujah marked a major turning point for the American public's conceptualization of the war in Iraq and the overall War on Terror, due largely to the constitution of the opposition. Specifically, after Fallujah, it became very difficult to determine exactly whom the U.S. was really fighting. The failure of American troops to control the city occurred predominately at the hands of Iraqi insurgents, not the Iraqi military of the previous government (Howard 1).<sup>30</sup> Instead, everyday Iraqi citizens took up the fight against the Americans, and were successful, despite superior resources on the U.S. side. Suddenly, the identification of the actual "enemy" became much more complicated for those back in the states. As *The Boston Globe* of April 11, 2004, illustrated, "[s]tories of mounting Iraqi casualties last week in Fallujah—punctuated on television with images of dead children and bombed-out houses—are fueling support for antioccupation fighters, drawing in some Iraqis who had shunned violent resistance" (Barnad 1). These depictions were not the glorified struggles for civilization against evil that many Americas were expecting. Prior to the invasion of Iraq, several members of the Bush Administration argued that the Iraqi government was supporting terrorism and that the U.S. would be happily greeted by Iraqi citizens as "liberators" (Milbank 1). The battle for Fallujah contradicted with this story at several levels. Not only did American forces lose to the citizens of Iraq during the battle, the people whom they were supposedly "liberating," but moreover, the

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rights violations during the Fallujah siege see Bing West's 2005 *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle For Fallujah*. Some of these accusations were later confirmed by the United States. On November 16, 2005, BBC News reported that U.S. Lt Col Barry Venable confirmed that White Phosphorus was used as an incendiary weapon by American forces.

<sup>29</sup> The U.S. would return to Fallujah in November 2004, in what is referred to as "The Second Battle of Fallujah." Heavy fighting lasted until late December 2004, and human rights violations were again directed toward the U.S.

<sup>30</sup> Reports do show that there may have been some cooperation between the remaining Iraqi military and insurgents; however, most opposition to U.S. forces in Fallujah came from Iraqi citizens.

reporting of the conflict insinuated that military forces were fighting dirty with the use of illegal weapons and tactics. *The Montreal Gazette* of April 12, 2004, declared that U.S. forces had killed 600 civilians “mainly women children and elderly” (Fisher 1).<sup>31</sup> Even for the most ardent supporters of the War on Terror, the conflict in Fallujah compromised the U.S.’s purpose and justification for fighting.

Ultimately, the political context of April, 2004, was one of moral dubiousness for American forces, and many in the public sphere were anxious for guidance. In contrast to the reports of Abu Ghraib and Fallujah, the Tillman death narrative represented a completely inversed illustration of U.S. conflict. As Abu Ghraib and Fallujah made America seem physically and spiritual weak, the Tillman narrative argued that we were still strong and just. In the death narrative there was no confusion about the differences between “terrorist”, “insurgent”, or “civilian”; instead, there is only the “enemy.”

The Abu Ghraib scandal and military failure in Fallujah were blistering condemnations of the effectiveness of Bush as commander-in-chief. The Tillman death narrative seemed to arrive at the right place and time for those in power in American society.<sup>32</sup> The Tillman family in particular noticed the peculiar timing of the institutional reporting. In his testimony to Congress, on April 24, 2007, Tillman’s brother and fellow soldier Kevin Tillman told investigators that he “believed the combination of a difficult battle in Fallujah, bad news about the state of the war, and emerging reports about Abu Ghraib prison created a motive to fictionalize the details of his brother’s death” (U.S. House “Misleading Information” 49). Kevin Tillman claims to believe that his brother’s death was used and manipulated by those in the government to overcome

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<sup>31</sup> In select instances I present information from international news sources to offer perspective. However, international news sources were not a component of the primary analysis.

<sup>32</sup> The evidence seems clearly to suggest that the timeliness of the Tillman death narrative was in all probability more than a coincidence, through proving so lies beyond my purpose here.

growing pessimism for war. Furthermore, writing four years after Tillman's death *The New York Times* of May 8, 2008 concluded:

With Abu Ghraib and chaos and death and plummeting approval ratings stunning the Bush regime in late April 2004, Pat Tillman came in handy. The government gave him a Silver Star and concocted a story about his death. Only later did a suspicious coroner stateside realize that the wounds came from American bullets, not ones used by the other side. (Vecsey 2)

This analysis of the national situation taking place at the time of Tillman's death enables us to understand more fully the rhetorical significance of the death narrative for those in positions of power. With some political perspective accomplished, let us now turn to the investigating the specific internal structures of the death narrative more fully.

### The Tillman Death Narrative

Following the announcement of the death of Tillman by military officials on April 24, 2004, thousands of news reports were dedicated to the fallen soldier. A vast majority of these representations relied on information provided by governmental and military officials, with many directly citing reports from Pentagon officials. Despite the breadth of coverage, there are several components and themes that were prevalent in the overall composition of the Tillman death narrative. The commonality of the narrative should not be surprising, because as communication scholar Carolyn Kitch notes, since institutional and cultural forces are largely responsible for the creation of national values, numerous media representations echo similar themes, even while operating independently of one another ("A Death in the American Family" 297). Thus, the similar themes of the narrative are a window into the institutional and cultural values of American society at the time of Tillman's death.

Furthermore, the frequently referenced events of the narrative acted by helping society to understand the meaning of the occurrence. In her study of public mourning in the aftermath of

9/11, Kitch argues “during the first few weeks after the disaster, a set of themes emerged through which Americans ‘understood’ what had happened. Those themes included courage, sacrifice, faith, redemption, and patriotism” (“Mourning in America” 213). Similar to the reporting during 9/11, several reoccurring themes were also present in the Tillman death narrative. This analysis discovered five repeated components of the Tillman death narrative: first, references to Tillman the professional athlete and his excellence on the football field; second, the events of 9/11; third, Tillman as a bastion for American values; fourth, Tillman’s symbolism for all those serving in the military; and finally, Tillman’s heroic death. These themes rhetorically influenced the ways society made sense of Tillman’s death and the larger War on Terror.

#### *Professional Athlete*

The first common rhetorical thread present in the Tillman death narrative was allusions made by the government and news media to Tillman’s career as a professional athlete. It should probably come as no surprise that every sample of discourse examined for this study made at least one reference to the fact that Tillman played professional football for the Arizona Cardinals. In the first official announcement of Tillman’s passing, the U.S. Defense Department broke the news to the America public by stating: “Today the military and sports communities alike mourned the loss of a Soldier [Tillman] who made the ultimate sacrifice in the war on terror” (Miles 2). Neither the government nor the media could divorce Tillman’s death from his athletic conquests on Sundays. *The Boston Globe* described Tillman’s passing on April 24, 2004 by stating:

Tillman spent four seasons playing strong safety for the Cardinals [...] At 5 feet 11 inches, 200 pounds, he was considered a ‘tweener’ by NFL scouts because he was too big to be a safety and too small to be a linebacker, but his drive and heart on the football field quickly dispelled any reservations about his lack of size. (Cafardo 2)

Despite his small physical stature, Tillman was one of the most acclaimed defensive backs in the league, and “[i]n 2000 Tillman established a team record of 224 tackles in a single season” (Lacayo 39). The Tillman narrative and legacy were inextricably linked to sport. Thus, since such a profound emphasis was placed on Tillman’s identity as a football player, as well as the parallels between football and war, the sports frame of the Tillman death narrative will be given additional attention in the next analytical chapter.<sup>33</sup>

### *9/11: A Call to Action*

The next rhetorical theme of the Tillman death narrative was as ubiquitous as the references made to football. Nearly every article dedicated to Tillman mentioned the powerful role that the 9/11 terrorist attacks played in his decision to fight in the U.S. War on Terror. As the initial government report explained:

He was so moved by the events of Sept. 11 2001, that he turned down a 3.6 million professional football contract to become an Army Ranger. Spc. Pat Tillman, 27, who was deployed with the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment from Fort Benning Ga., was killed April 22 during a firefight in southeastern Afghanistan. U.S. Central Command officials said Tillman was part of a coalition patrol that was ambushed near the village of Sperah, 40 kilometers southwest of Khowst. The patrol responded immediately with direct fire, and a firefight ensued before the enemy broke contact. (Miles par. 1)

In this report, the government cited 9/11 as the predominate catalyst that inspired Tillman to leave his career, reject substantial personal wealth, and enlist for military service. In the official press releases following Tillman’s death, his killers were not specifically identified; instead, they were characterized vaguely as the “enemy.” However, the persistent references to 9/11 clearly framed the enemy, and Tillman’s killers, to suggest terrorists. By mentioning 9/11 so heavily, the Tillman death narrative’s discourse established an implicit causality between Tillman’s death and terrorism.

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<sup>33</sup> In Chapter Four I provide a more thorough analysis of the presence and meaning of football in the Tillman death narrative by applying theories of hegemonic masculinity and sport culture (See pages 89-93).

The deeply emotional significance of 9/11 to American culture contributed to the inspirational nature of the Tillman death narrative for many Americans. Media representations implied that before 9/11, as professional football player Tillman had been uninterested in public service. Yet, the Tillman death narrative's discourse created the image that his passive attitude was transformed into selfless patriotism once the U.S. homeland was violated by foreign enemies. As the *USA Today* of April 27, 2004, illustrated:

On Sept. 12 2001 as the smoke cast a shadow over New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, the football player said his family had been to war. His great-grandfather, he said had been at Pearl Harbor. Then, in a voice that suggested excitement, challenge, even envy, Pat Tillman said he hadn't done a damn thing as far as laying myself on the line like that. And so I have a great deal of respect for those that have and what the flag stands for. (Kindred 2)

Kindred emphasized traditional cultural feelings of patriotism and public service by invoking images of Pearl Harbor and WWII. Tillman's call to action was viewed through a similar lens as those from the "greatest generation."<sup>34</sup> He described Tillman as "excit[ed]" and "env[ious]" of those who put their lives on the line for America. Further, Kindred positioned Tillman as a man who underwent a metamorphosis from passive to active U.S citizen. Before 9/11, Tillman "hadn't done a damn thing as far as laying" himself on the line. Governmental officials and those in the media pointed to 9/11 as the spark, the wake-up call in which an ordinary man made the choice to become an extraordinary citizen.

Along with acting as inspiration for Tillman's choice, the 9/11 component of the narrative worked immediately to create symbolic battle-lines between good and evil. As

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<sup>34</sup> The term "The Greatest Generation" was coined by journalist Tom Brokaw to describe those Americans who grew up during The Great Depression and fought during World War II and is the subject of his 1998 book, *The Greatest Generation*. In general, The Greatest Generation refers to a time in American history when men and women supposedly acted selflessly for the common good. The term is meant to denote an exceptional level of virtue that was exemplified by certain Americans in 1930's-40's. Some historians have concluded that Brokaw's argument is an exaggeration and that there was indeed much dissent and conflict in America during this time period. For a more detailed discussion on the accuracy of The Greatest Generation argument consult Kenneth D. Rose's 2007, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II*.

President Bush succinctly described, in his 2004 speech at the White House Correspondence Dinner, “[f]riends say that this young man [Tillman] saw the images of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and seeing that evil, he felt called to defend America” (U.S. House “Misleading Information” 25). The President characterized Tillman as a defender of U.S. security who answered the call to fight against the atrocities of terrorism. When discussing Tillman, Bush’s rhetoric created an oversimplified, sanctified version of war, wherein a heroic citizen gave his life to defend the values and lives of his nation.

The importance of 9/11 to Tillman’s choice to serve was more than a convenient political opportunity for the Bush administration. One day before President Bush spoke at the Correspondence Dinner, former White House Speech Writer John Currin wrote the following email to Bush speech writer Matthew Scully: “[...] he [Tillman] never gave any media interview or discussed the reasons why he left the NFL to join the Rangers...we simply do not have any support for the statement that he decided to join the Rangers after seeing the burning towers on television” (28 Apr. 2004). Despite Currin’s concerns, Bush decided to declare that the evil events of 9/11 motivated Tillman to protect America, without substantiating the claim. The names of the “friends” that Bush cited in his speech have never been identified. Moreover, in 2007, the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform investigation found that 9/11 “was the subject of extensive discussions during the speechwriting process” (U.S. House “Misleading Information” 25). Both the government and the news media accentuated 9/11 in ways that were not congruent to the available information on Tillman’s choice to serve. Thus, the 9/11 connection was largely an exaggeration, a rhetorical tactic in the narrative which symbolically linked Tillman’s death to the terrorist actions that incited War on Terror.

Of course I am not asserting here that 9/11 was not a factor in Tillman's decision to leave the National Football League. In all likelihood 9/11 was a noteworthy motivation for Tillman to fight. However, as Tillman's wife Marie noted, “[i]t wasn't like 9/11 happened and Pat immediately said, ‘I'm joining the Army’” (Krakauer 136). In contrast, institutional representations implied that Tillman was ready to fight the moment that 9/11 occurred. Furthermore, Tillman's mother Mary Tillman wrote in her memoir that she “can only assume that Pat [...] w[as] mortified by the events of 9/11, like all of us” (Tillman 158). Some journalists have noted that Tillman refused to participate in interviews after joining the army and that he wanted the reasons behind his choice to serve to remain private (Pennington 1). Therefore, it seems clear that institutional forces in the government and military embellished the role of 9/11 in Tillman's decision making for the purposes of glorifying his sacrifice and strengthening the morality of the War on Terror in which he fought.

#### *Defender of American Values*

In reports of his death, Tillman also was characterized as a protector and manifestation of U.S. cultural values. Authority figures in the government and media discussed Tillman as a bastion of traditional American principles. For example, Tillman was dubbed an “American hero. Patriot. A man of uncommon courage and selflessness” (Bordow 1).

When describing the life and death of Tillman, those in the media portrayed him as the quintessential American patriot, who was willing to leave the fame of professional sports to help this country in a time of need. *The New York Times* of April 24, 2004, called his service in the military “one of the most public examples of patriotism in the aftermath of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001” (Pennington 1). Indeed there was little room for moral ambiguity in the Tillman

narrative since his patriotism was declared absolute. *The St. Petersburg Times* of April 24, 2004, depicted Tillman's life and death as:

A story about a hero. It is a story about bravery and belief, about pride and patriotism, about honor and heartache. It is a story about the glory of sacrifice and the horrors of war. It is a story about a tragic death and a wonderful life. It is a story of Pat Tillman. (Shelton 1)

Despite being a very complex character, with nuanced motivations and beliefs, the media framed Tillman primarily through rigid conservative values of heroism and bravery. As *The New York Times* of April 24, 2004, lamented, “[m]ore than ever in our culture of convenience, there is a troublesome blurring between service and subsidy, conviction and celebrity” (Araton 1).

Conversely, the Tillman death narrative did not blur traditional cultural lines, it reinforced them. Media studies scholar Adi Drori-Avraham argues in her analysis of public mourning following 9/11, “in mourning, the movement forward is essentially a movement back; what lies on the other side of death is exactly what was before, not the ego as such, but the ego as an ideological constitution” (294). In the mourning of Tillman, the government and news media emphasized traditional American values, which may have been responsible for nurturing feelings of national pride. This analysis of Tillman’s death narrative reflects the presence of pervasive ideological forces underlying the reporting of Tillman’s death.

In the death narrative, Tillman stood as a hero from a sacred past. He was discussed as an individual with characteristics that were rare, and simultaneously, desired by American society from an institutional standpoint. Sport culture scholar Klye Kusz contends in his analysis of the institutional representation of Tillman:

He is both American underdog and White masculine American ideal; he is everyman and a slightly different, nonconformist whose nonconformity makes him appear as a non-establishment figure but whose memory is invoked to celebrate America’s dominant mythologies and the cultural revival of a conventional masculinity with a wild man at its core. (86)

The depiction of Tillman may have had a socializing effect for many in society by elevating the deeds of a hero who represented a simpler and more wholesome time in America.

Tillman's traditional sensibility and altruism were most pronounced by the media with regard to his decision to join the Army for non-material reasons. Particular focus was paid to the monetary implications of Tillman's decision to serve his country. The initial government press release of Tillman's death declared in the first sentence that “[Tillman] turned down a \$3.6 million professional football contract to become an Army Ranger” (Miles par. 1). As an established professional athlete, Tillman was able to play football for millions of dollars. In a capitalistic nation that often conceptualizes personal success through monetary affluence, Tillman's decision to reject financial security seemed to resonate with a lost sensibility.

Moreover, the Tillman death narrative stood as a rhetorical challenge to contemporary concerns that greed and indifference were governing American society. The depictions of Tillman revealed that at a moment in history when many Americans looked inward, one individual was brave enough to think of others. *Time* magazine of May 3, 2004 explained, “[i]n a culture obsessed with money, there's something hard to believe about a person who turns down that kind of offer for an \$18,000-a year job with the Army” (Lacayo 38). Tillman's moral actions became an example for many in society to follow. Working for the U.S. Army was not only a cut in pay, but it was obviously more physically hazardous than football. As *The San Francisco Chronicle* of April 24, 2004 reported:

Tillman was unusual. He turned his back on a football career that was at its peak and promised to pay him 1.2 million a year in favor of a dangerous three-year military career that paid him 18,000 a year[...] His decision was just the most startling example of Tillman's bucking expectations and going against the grain. (Curtis and Kim 1)

Thus, in the Tillman narrative the American public was offered an individual who not only gave his life for his country, but perhaps equally important for a capitalistic society, Tillman sacrificed money and fame to enlist. In the media reporting, Tillman's mission was to protect American values and to aid the successful completion of the War on Terror. He was seen as a maverick who rejected the lazy inhibition of his generation for a more righteous path.

#### *Representative of Those Who Serve*

Tillman was undoubtedly discussed by the government and news media as an archetype of American citizenship. However, within a U.S. military context, Tillman's actions and sacrifice were considered standard issue. The fourth component of the death narrative argued that Tillman's heroic actions were symbolic of all of those who serve in the U.S. military. In his speech at the White House Correspondence Dinner, President Bush extended the glory of Tillman's sacrifice to all those who serve in the armed forces by stating, “[Tillman] was modest because he knew there were many like him making their own sacrifices. They fill the ranks of the Armed Forces. Every day, somewhere, they do brave and good things without notice” (U.S. House “Misleading Information” 25). Through his rhetoric, Bush implicated that although Tillman was gone, there were plenty of other men and women who exhibited the same exceptional qualities. With outstanding character similar to Tillman, such people were said to fill the ranks of the U.S. military. Hence, Tillman's death narrative was constructed as just one example of the omnipresent heroism found in the U.S. military. As if to emphasize his role as one of many, Tillman's official citation for the Silver Star states, “[i]n making the ultimate sacrifice for his team and platoon, Corporal Patrick D. Tillman reflected great credit upon himself, the Joint Task Force, and the United States Army” (“Army Awards of the Silver Star”

1).<sup>35</sup> Despite being an individual award, Tillman's Silver Star citation contends that he was just one component in a larger institutional force of excellence and virtue. The epic achievements of Tillman were explicitly that of the entire United States Army, and implicitly, the President and the War on Terror.

Tillman's death narrative certainly made a considerable impact on national attitudes toward service and those who serve. Regardless of certain public fears that the War on Terror may never reach a satisfactory conclusion, military service was largely glorified in American culture at the time. According to crisis communication expert Steve Adubato:

This nationally televised memorial galvanized public opinion and brought great sympathy not only to the Tillman family but to all soldiers fighting this courageous battle in the treacherous hills of Afghanistan against the terrorists whose goal was to kill us all. It was a powerful narrative that resonated on a deeply emotional and visceral level. (81)

Tillman's death narrative aided a fervor of pro-American sentiment. The clear delineations between good/evil and American/terrorist struck an emotional chord with many of those in the American public. Suddenly, the costs and stakes of the war became clearer to some of those who did not have family in the military. As one anonymous reader eloquently editorialized in *The Washington Post* of April 24, 2004:

I didn't know Pat Tillman but I am grateful to have gotten to learn about him in the past few days. I cried for joy when I learned how he lived and about his patriotism. It is interesting that he came into the public's consciousness at the same time as pictures of flag-draped coffins returning from the battlefield were revealed. Why? Because his death has shone a light on all the other men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. ("To an American Dying Young" 1)

Through Tillman's sacrifice, the deaths and sacrifices of others in the military became manifested. Even though many people did not personally know Tillman, his death narrative helped to establish the meaning of war, sacrifice, and patriotism for the public.

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<sup>35</sup> I use present tense here because Tillman's Silver Star citation has not been revised in recognition of his death from friendly-fire. The official record of his Silver Star still contains the information about his heroic death in a fire-fight with enemy forces.

Additionally, respecting military service also became an appropriate tactic for honoring Tillman. The public was instructed by those in the news media to awaken to the realities of war and contribute support for those people who defend the nation. According to *EPSN* of April 24, 2004:

September 11, 2001 didn't inspire Tillman to wear a flag on his football helmet or sing the "Star Spangled Banner" a little louder on Sundays. It inspired an epiphany that most Americans would've never stopped long enough to consider -- never mind act upon. Without ever meeting him, without ever hearing him completely detail his motives, it seems that what Pat Tillman would've wanted today was for everyone to remember those Americans and allies dying every day in Afghanistan and Iraq. (Wojinarowski 1)

By estimating what Tillman would desire from the public following his death, the news media's discourse may have impacted the American public by transforming the feelings of grief into an emotion of national support for those in the military. As the Tillman narrative indicated, after dying for America the least that society could do for Tillman was to support those such as he still living and fighting in the Middle East. Interestingly, both of the above quotations demonstrate that the reporters did not know Tillman personally and could only guess what his intentions were. Consequently, their views and feelings toward Tillman's passing are most likely not from Tillman himself, but instead, the institutional depiction of his death crafted by those in the government, military, and news media.

### *Heroic Death*

The final dominant theme of the Tillman death narrative was the description of how Tillman died on the battlefield. Throughout the death narrative there were multiple illustrations of foundational moments in Tillman's life that contributed to his personal excellence. Nevertheless, within the Tillman story, his death was framed as his finest hour. It is not merely the fact that Tillman died, but instead, *how* he died that created much of the meaning of his death narrative. On the day that his death became public, few details were provided by the

government. On behalf of the Department of Defense, Miles reported the following on April 24, 2004:

Spc. Pat Tillman, 27, who was deployed with the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment from Fort Benning Ga., was killed April 22 during a firefight in southeastern Afghanistan. U.S. Central Command officials said Tillman was part of a coalition patrol that was ambushed near the village of Sperah, 40 kilometers southwest of Khowst. The patrol responded immediately with direct fire, and a firefight ensued before the enemy broke contact. Tillman and an Afghan Militia Force soldier were killed during the engagement and two coalition soldiers were wounded officials said. (par. 1)

All that was known from this initial report was that Tillman was killed following an ambush and firefight with enemy forces in southeastern Afghanistan. Yet, the limited details provided by government officials did not give the media pause to speculate on the specifics of Tillman's death. For example, *The USA Today* of April 27, 2004, wrote:

We don't yet know how it happened, but we do know what happens to Rangers. We know about another ambush in Afghanistan. It happened on March 4, 2002, two months before Tillman enlisted with intentions of becoming a Ranger. At 10,200 feet on the Afghanistan Mountain Takur Ghar, 23 Rangers arrived in a MH-47E Chinook helicopter, according to new accounts. Hellfire met them. They rescued a Navy SEALS reconnaissance team trapped by al-Qaeda militia fortified in a mountaintop bunker and armed with machine guns, grenade launchers and small arms. Three Rangers and four other American soldiers were killed. (Kindred 1)

Previous violence toward Army Rangers in Afghanistan by al-Qaeda was used as a template to set the stage for the description of Tillman's tragic, yet epic, death. In both governmental press releases and news media representations, terrorists, probably al-Qaeda, were clearly the ones being held responsible for killing Tillman. The area in which Tillman was killed, combined with the fact that he was an Army Ranger, seemed to exclude other possible explanation for his death. Moreover, as *The Boston Globe* of April 24, 2004, noted, "Tillman's battalion was involved in 'Operations Mountain Storm,' searching for Taliban and al-Qaida fighters along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border" (Cafardo 1). There were few possible perpetrators of an "ambush" against American armed forces in Afghanistan. These characterizations of Tillman's death in

the media only serviced until the media was given more elaborate details of Tillman's final moments by the military, which would have to wait until Tillman's nomination for the Silver Star on April 30, 2004.

Without question, the most elaborate description of Tillman's death was presented in his recommendation for the Silver Star on April 30, 2004. From this military report, most subsequent media portrayals of Tillman's death were formed. With its mythic overtones, the Silver Star recommendation resembled the plot of summer action blockbuster. According to the official citation:

Although Tillman's regiment was already safely out of the area of the attack, he ordered his team to dismount and then maneuvered the Rangers up a hill near the enemy's location. As they crested the hill, Tillman directed his team into firing positions and personally provided suppressive fire with an M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon machine gun. ("Army Awards of the Silver Star" 1)

This illustration showed Tillman as a man unafraid and disinterested in his own safety. In the narrative the only concerns of Tillman were the lives of his men and the success of the mission. Despite initially evading the deadly enemy ambush, Tillman decided to re-engage in the battle. He was described as relentlessly pursuing the enemy and expertly wielding the pinnacle of military technological weaponry.

The Silver Star account of Tillman's death was mentioned thousands of times in the weeks following his death by media sources. Moreover, this depiction was also heard by millions of people on television during Tillman's nationally televised funeral. Among other individuals, U.S. Navy Seal Steve White was responsible for attending the funeral and presenting the surviving family members with Tillman's Silver Star and Purple Heart awards. As a friend and fellow serviceman with Tillman, White described to the people attending and listening the manner of Tillman's death according to governmental officials:

The Silver Star and Purple Heart that Pat has earned will be given to Marie at a private ceremony. The Silver Star is one of this nation's highest awards; the Purple Heart is rewarded for wounds received in combat. If you're the victim of an ambush, there are very few things that you can do to increase your chances for survival, one of which is to get off that ambush point as fast as you can. One of the vehicles in Pat's convoy could not get off. He made the call; he dismounted his troops, taking the fight to the enemy uphill to seize the tactical high ground from the enemy. This gave his brothers in the downed vehicle time to move off that target. He directly saved their lives with that move. Pat sacrificed himself so that his brothers could live. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.<sup>36</sup> (166)

White's speech was based exclusively on the information provided in the Silver Star citation along with reports from military officials not in attendance. The military and government's rhetoric revealed the great attention that was paid to frame Tillman's death in the most heroic way possible. According to the military's interpretation, Tillman was unfortunately confronted with a very difficult situation with little chance of success. However, regardless of the numerous distractions, Tillman acted resolutely to motivate his troops and overcome the geographical advantage of the enemy. The government's rhetoric maintained that by moving quickly and without hesitation, Tillman was able to protect his fellow soldiers, sadly at the cost of his own life.

The Tillman death narrative positioned him as the ideal American citizen and soldier who made the ultimate sacrifice for his men, his mission, and his country. Interestingly, if not suspiciously, the institutional report of Tillman's death contains numerous parallels to the fifth stanza of the Army Ranger Creed:

ENERGETICALLY WILL I MEET THE ENEMIES OF MY COUNTRY. I SHALL  
DEFEAT THEM ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE FOR I AM BETTER TRAINED AND  
WILL FIGHT WITH ALL MY MIGHT. SURRENDER IS NOT A RANGER WORD. I  
WILL NEVER LEAVE A FALLEN COMRADE TO FALL INTO THE HANDS OF

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<sup>36</sup> Her 2008 memoir reveals that White was incredibly devastated after discovering that he had helped to disseminate official lies about Tillman's death at his funeral. It is important to note that unlike his superiors, White believed in the Tillman death narrative that he helped to spread and was unaware at the time that Tillman was killed by friendly fire.

**THE ENEMY AND UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES WILL I EVER EMBARRASS  
MY COUNTRY. (“The Ranger Creed” par. 5)**

The Tillman narrative clearly described Tillman as “energetically” confronting the enemies of America as he was depicted charging a hill to overtake the enemies’ superior position. Moreover, in the narrative, Tillman visibly used “all [his] might” since his actions led to his unfortunate death. The death narrative also referenced his superior training and decision making skills which contributed to the safety of Tillman’s comrades. Finally, it was impossible for Tillman to “embarrass [his] country” because the narrative framed him as a potential symbol for America itself. As a representation of American superiority, the Tillman death narrative argued that certain values were sacred to American society and embodied by Tillman.

**The Sacred Centre**

After outlining the prevailing components of the Tillman narrative, it is now possible to extract some of the dominant social values portrayed by the government and news media. As communication scholars Mervi Pantti and Jan Wieten argue in their analysis of the media coverage following the murder of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, “[t]he media event brings to surface the values and assumptions that are most central to a particular culture” (302). This analysis concurs with Pantti and Wieten’s conclusion, given that the media spectacle of Tillman’s death certainly elevated particular values over others in American culture. Tillman’s death narrative became a window through which society had the opportunity to evaluate itself and also what was important to the body politic.

The distinguished values of the Tillman death narrative constituted what Pantti and Sumiala call the “sacred centre.” In review, the authors assert that “Centre” refers to the central values system and also the authoritative institutions and persons who typically express the foundational value system. These symbolic centres are sacred because they deal with “core

values and beliefs” (123). This analysis of Tillman’s death narrative reveals that he was framed as a symbol for American morality and virtue. Thus, because institutional forces positioned Tillman as an individual who expressed many core social beliefs, the discourse of his death narrative functioned as a possible window into the “sacred centre” of American culture at that time. After analyzing the major themes of the Tillman death narrative, I argue that the government and news media established sacrifice and violence as sacred American values.

### *Sacrifice*

Initially, the personal resonance of the death narrative for many in society was largely the result of the rhetorical weight placed on sacrifice as a vital American virtue. Tillman’s choice to join the military led him to surrender both financial and physical well-being for military service.

*The Washington Post* of April 24, 2004, explained:

The 27-year-old Tillman, who died Thursday after a firefight with anti-coalition militia about 25 miles southwest of a U.S. base in Afghanistan, seemingly had all he could want before his enlistment. He had set the Cardinals’ record for tackles in 2000 and had been offered a three-year, \$3.6 million contract after his third year as a starter. He was a newlywed. (Elfin 1)

Despite being young, rich, successful, and married, Tillman freely elected to trade his exceptional private life for a life of public service. In particular, Tillman exchanged personal freedom to join the U.S. military and participate in the War on Terror. This remarkably selfless act functioned to exemplify that moral correctness was still present in America, even during times of war. Pantti and Sumiala describe, “[t]he function of ritual-laden media events is to construct the idea that society in fact has a moral centre, and the media have a natural access point to that centre” (123). The Tillman narrative emphasized his sacrifice to symbolize American morality and exceptionalism.

The reporting of Tillman's sacrifice not only revealed underlying virtues present in society, it also reinforced traditional values by promoting others to act similarly to Tillman. When asked to comment on the passing of Tillman, former Navy soldier and U.S. Senator, John McCain responded that he interpreted Tillman's choice of duty as "an inspiration to all of us to reclaim the essential public spiritedness of Americans that many of us [...] had worried was no longer our common distinguishing trait" (Kindred 2). Therefore, the Tillman death narrative symbolically reestablished public service as a paramount value for American citizens. Peoria, Arizona citizen Kimarie Aycock illustrated this point when she offered condolences to the Tillman family on the website *legacy.com* by saying:

I am so sorry to hear of the loss of Pat Tillman, who truly served as a great American role model. I believe that Pat and his family would want his remembrance to be the same as all of the other soldier who are so honorably serving our nation, and paying the highest price for our freedom and protection. (Aycock)

For people as Aychock, Tillman's death fostered feelings of reverence for his sacrifice and that of his fellow soldiers.

Tillman's life and death became a model through which Americans could evaluate their own morality and the health of the polis. One letter to the editor published in *The Boston Globe* of April 28, 2004, powerfully illustrated this point by writing: "As terrorists sit there contemplating a sacrifice for their ideology, we are making a far greater sacrifice for our country. We will never lose this war on terror, and people like Pat Tillman are the reason why. May god have mercy on his soul" (Belinky 1). Panti and Sumialia contend, "[t]he function of ritual [...] is in maintaining and restoring social unity through certain core symbols and the generation of collective sentiments, the channeling of social conflict and persuading members of society to conform to common values and norms" (122). Tillman's sacrifice became a channel through

which social unity was symbolically restored, since his death narrative forwarded a return of national cohesion against terrorism.

### *Violence*

One particular kind of social unison was correlated to the Tillman death narrative. Unfortunately, the Tillman death narrative did not communicatively facilitate public unanimity for peace. Rather, the second dominant value manifested in the Tillman death narrative was violence. Violence became one approach to evaluate Tillman, as well as a paradigm for the national response to Tillman's death. For example, military historian and retired Army lieutenant colonel John Lock told *The USA Today* of April 27, 2004:

All deaths are tragic [...] But some seem more tragic than others: *An American Warrior, Ranger Pat Tillman, Killed in Action on the Field of Battle, 22 April 2004. When one dies so tragically young, there is no finer epitaph.* And my heart swells with pride knowing that this nation still produces such fine young men.

(Kindred 2)

Although Tillman's death was heartbreaking, the above depiction glorified the way in which Tillman died. The presence of violence helped make Tillman's death heroic in the minds of those in society. For example, in the death narrative Tillman died on the battle field while uncompromisingly pursuing the enemies of America. Death by something common such as food poisoning, or cancer, would probably have been viewed as unworthy of an individual with such symbolic gravitas as Tillman. As a defender of American sanctity, it is possible that in the minds of the authors of the narrative, Tillman needed a death fitting to someone of his caliber.

As the public mourned the loss of Tillman, the manner in which the soldier died became a prospective source of pride for the American public. While Tillman lost his life, he definitely did not go down without a fight. Further, the story of Tillman's last moments seemed to resonate with a final wish from Tillman to continue the fight and seek revenge. In his book, *Terrorism*

*and Politics of Fear*, David Altheide presents the comments of an anonymous blogger who wrote:

Pat Tillman was too great of a warrior to be taken out by Taleban types [...] His life and dedication proved that. I will always remember Pat Tillman as a Great American Warrior. His spirit will touch us from the other side and inspire us on to crush the evil jihad now upon us. His fight continues with us. (199)

The author of this entry seemed almost in denial that a individual like Tillman could have been killed by terrorists. However, this selection does indicate that some Americans viewed the Tillman death narrative as a call to action. *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* epitomized this sentiment on April 25, 2004, by stating:

A man of rare bravery died in the war on terror last week in the hellhole known as Afghanistan. As soon as word was out that former NFL player Pat Tillman had died a hero's death, America began mourning him like it had mourned no other individual since this horror began when madmen with hearts of pure evil guided airplanes into densely populated buildings. ("Tillman a Hero, But Not Only One" 1)

The news media's discourse argued that it was practically unholy for a brave U.S. solider such as Tillman to die at the hands of the evil terrorists responsible for 9/11. Hence, one adequate response presented to society was to finish the job by making sure that Tillman did not die in vain and to make those responsible for his death meet their own end at the hands of America. In their analysis of President Bush's use of mythic rhetoric following 9/11, communication researchers Mark West and Chris Carey claim, "[t]he rugged qualities of the frontiersman at war allow the public-through the shared rhetorical vision-to navigate its own post-September 11 feelings of both virtue and vice, of faith in community and desire for revenge" (396). The rhetoric of the Tillman death narrative functioned in part by nurturing public belief in American values and persuading citizens to fight for those virtues. As a manufactured symbol for the best qualities of America, Tillman's sacrifice and death helped develop the potential for revenge. It

was through the possibility of violence that society was given a opportunity to live up to the Tillman legacy.

By balancing the values of sacrifice and violence Tillman was crafted as a transformative figure in contemporary American history. Those in the government, military, and news media described him as kind and deadly, selfless and vicious. Therefore, Tillman was able to sacrifice his life for the common good, while simultaneous, acting as an American instrument of death against terrorism. Ironically, Tillman was taken away from America by violence, but a fitting response from society was an escalation in bloodshed. There was little room in the Tillman death narrative for peace protestors, pacifists, or deliberation. Tillman had defended America, and so it became feasible for the public to defend his honor by winning the War on Terror.

#### Missing Components of the Death Narrative

The above analysis reveals many of the imperatives that the Tillman death narrative glorified, as well as some perspectives that were silenced as a result. However, there were several factual events surrounding Tillman's death that were purposefully excluded from the narrative which are of considerable interest to this study. Several of the investigations into the Tillman controversy revealed information that was censored by governmental and military forces. These omissions cast further light on the meaning of the Tillman death narrative, as well as the specific values of those in the government and news media. As women's studies and English professor Cheryl Glenn posits in her book *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, “silence can be as powerful as speech” and “is too often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power [...] Silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use” (xi). This analysis focuses on three omissions in the Tillman death narrative which removed much of the narrative’s complexity and contradiction, including: first,

the death of an Afghan militia; second, Tillman's growing anti-war beliefs; and third, death by friendly-fire.

#### *Unknown Soldier*

In the weeks following April 23, 2004, the media was saturated with reports of Tillman's death and sacrifice. However, of the thousands of articles dedicated to Tillman's death and its meaning for the mission in the Middle East, almost no articles mentioned the fact that another person had died that day. In fact, this individual had died literally alongside Tillman (Krakauer 260). The only mention of this person by the government or military was in the initial press release involving Tillman's death, in which on behalf of the Department of Defense Miles reported, "Tillman and *an Afghan Militia Force soldier* were killed during the engagement" (1). Little attention was given to this nameless soldier or his role in the events that unfolded that day. In fact, military officials seemed incapable of offering any information about him at all. As *ESPN* journalist Mike Fish exposed in his four-part series dedicated to Tillman, "[i]n stark contrast with Tillman, the Afghan remains a true unknown soldier. U.S. military officials told *ESPN.com* they aren't certain of his identity" ("An Un-American Tragedy" 8). The inability of those in government and military to determine the Afghan's identity was a major issue for the Tillman family, who remained dedicated to discovering the name of the individual who died next to Tillman. Mary Tillman wrote in her memoir that after frequent requests for additional information:

The agent then tells us they have finally learned the name of the AMF [Afghanistan Militia Force] soldier killed before Pat. For three years no one has been able to tell us the name of this soldier. We are told his name is Thani...Just 'Thani'? We all find that name to be unbelievable. It seems that most Afghans I know have many names. Thani is also a tribal name in that region. This may have been part of his name, but I don't think we are being told the truth. (290)

The pursuit for the identity of the Afghan soldier took place entirely behind the scenes because neither those in the government nor news media found the solider to be particularly significant. It was not until 2009 that author John Krakauer discovered this soldier's identity: "For more than a year after Tillman's death, the Army reported that the identity of this Afghan soldier was unknown and then announced that his name was Thani. This is incorrect. He was named Sayed Farhad" (260). Because of the extraordinary emphasis placed on Tillman, instead of his Afghan comrade, Farhad's death is able to act as a foil for the Tillman death narrative.

In the narrative, the Afghan soldier who gave his life fighting with Tillman was not even granted a supporting role in the government's representation. The omission of Farhad seems to reveal a great deal about the government's possible rhetorical vision for the Tillman death narrative. Specifically, the omission of Farhad indicates that the Tillman death narrative valued nationalistic support over international cooperation in the War on Terror. This perhaps should come as no surprise since the Bush Administration had repeatedly shown its disinterest in the international community. As political scientists Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke argue, "[w]ithin six months, the [Bush] administration announced its intention to reject six international agreements, thus attracting charges of 'unilateralism' from the international community" (121). As a foundational reflection of neo-conservative doctrine, the Bush Administration did not place international cooperation as a high American value compared to domestic support.

Farhad's death was a possible opportunity for the Bush Administration to create bridges between Western and Middle Eastern societies. It would have been incredibly easy for the government and military to use Farhad's death as an example of how U.S. forces were fighting alongside Middle Easterners against the evils of terrorism. Also, Farhad's service indicated that there were indeed those in the Middle East who were sympathetic to the U.S. mission. As

Krakauer explains, “[t]he dead Afghan was not an enemy fighter. He was Sayed Farhad, the twenty-seven-year-old AMF soldier who’d attached himself to Tillman” (266). Farhad’s death offered the administration a unique prospect to weaken the dialectical tension between Western and Middle Eastern cultures. However, the U.S. public was already facing difficulty differentiating between enemies and allies, which ultimately may have made the narrative about cooperation between U.S. and Afghan forces unattractive to those in power. The inclusion of Farhad would have likely weakened the clarity between good and evil that was created by the Tillman death narrative. As the narrative stood, Tillman heroically died fighting those in the Middle East, not working with them. Therefore, the Tillman death narrative maintained a strict rhetorical division between West/Middle East, American/Terrorist, and Good/Evil.

It is important to take pause and consider some of the similarities and differences between Tillman and Farhad. Both were young men who made incredible sacrifices to participate in the War on Terror, and both were killed by bullets from U.S. troops. However, one person’s death became iconic, while the other’s inconsequential. Why was Tillman the only person worthy of praise? Was it because he was richer than Farhad or because he was once a professional athlete? Or could it be because Tillman was a white American male fighting a war in which Middle Easterners were demonized? For every white war hero there must be thousands of Sayed Farhads, nameless and faceless victims of war whose sacrifices will never grace the pages of a newspaper.

#### *Tillman’s Growing Opposition to War*

The Tillman death narrative presented the soldier as a hyper-American individual who was unblinking in his support of America. This construction of Tillman’s symbolism representing an alternative reality is precisely what sociologist Jean Baudrillard described as

“simulacrum.” In his essay, “Public Character and the Simulacrum: The Construction of the Soldier Patriot and Citizen Agency in Black Hawk Down” Stephen Klien summarizes the simulacrum as “the replacement of reality with a montage of signs designed to resemble reality. What is perceived as real, then, is actually the reproduction of simulacra” (437). The Tillman death narrative did not reflect the actual events of his death, but instead, substituted those events with another reality. It was implicated that no American hero of Tillman’s stature would oppose the policies of his president and country. Conversely, excluded from the death narrative was the reality that Tillman was becoming progressively opposed to the war in Iraq and President Bush’s leadership. According to *The Daily Mail* of London on August 4, 2007, “[l]etters home and memories of those who knew him in Iraq suggest that after his initial enthusiasm, he had decided that Iraq was not just a quagmire but an ‘illegal’ war” (Laurence 39). Tillman’s personal beliefs posed a potential public relations nightmare for those in the Bush Administration. As columnist Michael Niman wrote, “there existed a very real possibility that Tillman, in the weeks leading up to the 2004 presidential election, might go public with his anti-war, anti-Bush, dealing a critical blow to the very foundation of the Bush administration’s propaganda pyramid” (5). Any admission that Tillman was opposed to the war in Iraq could have jeopardized the lucidity offered by the death narrative. The Bush Administration worked tirelessly to place the war in Iraq, and Afghanistan, under the blanket of the War on Terror (Curl 1). Thus, the Tillman death narrative resisted distinctions between the war in Iraq and the War on Terror while maintaining the story’s lucidity. In the narrative, Tillman remained a loyal follower of President Bush and defender of the U.S. against all foreign enemies.

### *Friendly Fire*

The final omission of the Tillman death narrative was certainly the most scandalous and controversial. For strategic rhetorical purposes, those in the military and government did not immediately reveal the cause of Tillman's death. Tillman was not killed by enemies of the U.S., but rather fell victim to “friendly fire” or “fratricide.” Moreover, at the time and location of Tillman's death no hostiles were in the immediate area (Walker 1). Combat can obviously be incredibly confusing, and friendly-fire cases can take a considerable time to sort out. In the Tillman case, however, “[t]he Rangers who were on that hill knew immediately that this was friendly fire. There was no question” (Siegel 1). Away from the battlefield “officials at the highest levels knew within a matter of days that Corporal Tillman's death was a likely fratricide,” even though they “did not share this information with the Tillman family or the public for another month” (U.S. House “Misleading Information” 12). There is little question that those responsible for crafting the Tillman death narrative knew he was killed by fratricide but initially excluded it from the governmental reports.

Friendly fire is an unfortunate reality of war. Yet, such incidents contain little value for discourse aimed at gaining public support for military operations. Essentially, friendly fire events threaten the partition between enemy and ally. The idea of U.S. soldiers accidentally killing Tillman would potentially have obfuscated the meaning of the War on Terror for the American public, or at least the understanding preferred by those in power. For the authors of the narrative, the idea of a hero such as Tillman dying at the hands of U.S. soldiers was perhaps too disturbing and counterproductive to include in the story of his death.

## The Tillman Narrative and the War on Terror

The above analysis describes the form of the Tillman death narrative as well as its underlying ideology. The final section of this chapter focuses on the specific rhetorical arguments found within the narrative which were potentially geared at developing public support for the War on Terror. The Tillman death narrative's discourse was merely a story; it became a pro-war argument delivered by institutional forces in the government, military, and news media. One goal of this study is to attempt to answer how the Tillman death narrative's rhetoric possibly fostered public support and unity for the War on Terror. Moreover, this study is concerned with the ways in which the Tillman death narrative gave meaning to U.S. military operations. The examination of the narrative revealed three rhetorical mechanisms which likely acted to persuade the public to support the war effort, including; first, the extension of 9/11 and establishment of guilt; second, the transfer of morality from Tillman to governmental and military forces; and finally, the oversimplification of war.

### *Establishing Guilt*

The first communicative argument in the Tillman death narrative's discourse was the extension of 9/11 and the establishment of guilt. As revealed in the second death narrative theme, 9/11 was a major part of the reporting on Tillman's death. The government and news media continually referenced 9/11 as the foremost inspiration for Tillman's choice to serve. The emphasis on 9/11 rhetorically linked Tillman's death to that heartbreak day where a remarkably high level of national unity was invoked. By evoking the terrorist attacks, the death narrative resurrected a comparable type of national support that followed the tragedy for many of those in society. For example, *The St. Petersburg Times* of April 24, 2004, explained: "He was the one we all knew, and in the comfort of our own lives it was easy to latch onto Pat Tillman.

*And so a part of the rest of us died with him. To most of us, another tower fell Friday. That's how it felt*" (Shelton 2). This representation equated the emotional response of Tillman's death to the destruction of the World Trade Center. Tillman died nearly three years after the terrorist attack, and as public support for war began to wane, the Bush Administration insisted that our society should not "forget the lessons of 9/11" (Borger 1). Tillman's death narrative functioned as a potential reminder that America was still under attack by the forces of evil and that terrorism should be eliminated without pause.

The extension of 9/11 was a persuasive strategy that the Bush Administration used regularly to gain support for military endeavors. For instance, in their analysis of Bush's wartime rhetoric, researchers Sue Lockett John and colleagues argue:

During summer and autumn 2002 President George W. Bush extended the September 11 crisis through emphasis in public communication on internal 'homeland' security and an external 'war on terror'-- discourses into which Iraq was carefully inserted over time. (196)

9/11 was often mentioned in discussions of the war in Iraq in an effort to connect the mission to remove Saadam Hussein to the overall War on Terror. As rhetorician and women's studies scholar Deepa Kumar asserts, the connection between Iraq and 9/11 was made largely "through the method of establishing guilt-by-suggestion. By mentioning Iraq and al-Qaeda in the same breath, and by constantly repeating the connection, the link was established" ("Media, War, and Propaganda" 55). By repeatedly mentioning 9/11, the rhetoric of the death narrative formed an association between Tillman's death and the War on Terror in which he was participating.

The extension of 9/11 also may have acted to establish guilt within the American psyche. As the government and news media discussed Tillman as a hero for responding to the 9/11 attacks with public service, the majority of the American public were portrayed as lazy and unthankful. Consider *The USA Today* of April 27, 2004, which wrote, "now we also know how

much is asked of U.S. soldiers even though so little is asked of millions of Americans safe at home" (Kindred 1). Those participating in the War on Terror were mirrored as "true" Americans, whereas those who did not support the war effort were implicitly considered selfish. This guilt was a potentially a persuasive tactic to foster support for the U.S. military, and hence, the foreign policy objectives of the Bush Administration. In the death narrative, the American public was kept safe largely because of the actions and sacrifices of a moral few. As the *Boston Globe* of April 24, 2004, reported:

There was no general call to arms following 9/11, and there was no stampede to the recruiting office on the part of robust young professional athletes. There was no long line of youthful patriots willing to forego millions of dollars to act on a deep personal principle. There was just one such person, and his name was Pat Tillman. (Ryan 1)

Tillman became one exceptional American whose remarkable sacrifice contrasted those of the public who were referenced as not participating in the War on Terror with action or support.

In a society that had arguably become disinterested in sacrifice and altruism, Tillman was referenced as an exception to be emulated. Tillman's death narrative articulated a need for change that needed to take place within American society. *ESPN* of April 24, 2004, argued:

Tillman is a face for today, and maybe America needed that, because everyone had started to grow numb to the mounting losses overseas, that lost sense of the tragedy that unfolded every day there. The big, fancy battles that finished with the fall of Baghdad no longer fill television screens, and *maybe Americans who became lost again in the everyday minutia needed a kick in the stomach*. (Wojnarowski 1)

Thus, Tillman's death was framed as a wake-up-call for those in the American public who had grown tired and oppositional to war. The death narrative's rhetoric argued that the security and sanctity of American society was placed on the shoulders of men and women such as Tillman. As a result, the institutional discourse of those in the government, military, and news media contended that society had a debt to those who had given their lives for the sake of national interests.

Possible repayment methods included the public expressing of national support, quieting of dissent, and servicing in the armed forces. In conjunction with the rhetorical impact of establishing guilt, the Tillman death narrative was very effective from a recruitment perspective. An internal media assessment from the Army on April 24, 2004, concluded that the story of Tillman's death helped generate the most media interest in the U.S. Army "since the end of active combat last year." The report also noted that "[t]he Ranger Tillman story had been extremely positive in all media" (U.S. House "Misleading Information" 11). By perpetuating the memory of 9/11 and establishing a sense of guilt within the public, the discourse of the Tillman death narrative promoted governmental recruitment for the War on Terror.

### *Transferring Morality*

The second pro-war association in the narrative was the transfer of morality from Tillman to institutional forces in the government and military. The death narrative functioned as an inductive argument through which Tillman's unquestionable morality was symbolically transferred to the entire military, President Bush, and the War on Terror. As the above analysis of the Tillman death narrative illustrates, as the embodiment of core American values, he was framed as a superior moral specimen. Furthermore, one dominant component of the Tillman death narrative was the discussion of his actions as symbolic of all of those in the military. Even for those opposed to President Bush and the War on Terror, criticism of Tillman would have been very challenging. The soldier's symbolism and sacrifice became a powerful lens through which the government and military may have become potentially justified in eyes of many Americans to conduct the War on Terror. *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* of April 25, 2004, reported:

But what is being lost in the sadness of the death of Pat Tillman is what some others did. Pat Tillman is a special hero, no doubt, but let's not elevate him among all our other

heroes. We don't have one hero. We have more than 100,000 serving in Iraq and Afghanistan on the front lines of this war. We haven't lost one brave man to enemy fire, we've lost more than 700 brave men and women. ("Tillman a Hero, But Not Only One" 1)

The death narrative not only made Tillman ostensibly more heroic, but also by implication, all of those who participated in the War on Terror as he did. Tillman's sacrifices became analogous to everyone in the armed forces. By extension, opposing the War on Terror would likely have had the appearance of condemnation of the brave men and women in the military. As Pantti and Wieten argue, dominant social views can "also have the effect of silencing other values and alternative perspectives" (302). The Tillman death narrative rhetorically uplifted the War on Terror by developing moral purpose and in doing so potentially neutralized a large amount of dissent from the American public.

Tillman's death created a window through which the Bush Administration had access to the hearts and minds of American society. As rhetorician Stephen Klien asserts, "American's who rely on television and film to learn about the world have developed an approach to political learning that favors images and personalities over policy issues and political institutions" (427). The American public's fondness for Tillman made his death a unique opportunity for the President to rebuild his controversial public persona as commander-in-chief. As Kusz contends, "despite the Bush administration's ban on media images of dead American soldiers returning in coffins, Tillman's funeral was broadcast live on ESPN networks" (84).<sup>37</sup> The death of American lives is often terrible publicity for war-time presidents. However, with the manipulation of Tillman's death the Bush Administration initially benefited from an account that elevated the virtue of the soldiers that serve in the military and by extension the commander-in-chief.

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<sup>37</sup> Critics of the War on Terror and the Bush Administration frequently charged that those in the White House were attempting to censure the realities of war by banning photography of the American dead. For more information on the public controversy surrounding war reporting during the Bush Administration, see Rossi, Melissa L. *What Every American Should Know About Who's really Running the World*. (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 2005).

As the constitutional commander of the armed forces, Bush was able to bask in the glory of Tillman's sacrifice. The death narrative's discourse implied that Tillman believed in Bush's leadership and mission enough to sacrifice both his fame and life. The first line of Tillman's Silver Star citation reads, “[t]he President of the United States takes pride in presenting the Silver Star Medal (Posthumously) to Pat Tillman, Corporal, U.S. Army, for gallantry in action” (“Silver Star” par. 1). As presidential scholar John Vile argues, U.S. presidents often seek to boost their own attractiveness by connecting themselves with popular individuals in society (46). Recognition would have been of interest to the Bush Administration suffering from low approval ratings; however, it is possible that Bush was potentially more interested in the justification for war that was encapsulated in the Tillman narrative. The heroic characterization of Tillman's death could have helped boost President Bush's perceived effectiveness as a military leader. Tillman's death narrative may also have aided the president by becoming a conduit through which Bush was able to articulate his political objectives. As Vile contends:

Presidents often serve not only as commanders in chief, or leaders of the nation's armed forces, but also as commentators in chief, responsible for highlighting the nobility of the nation's past leaders and heroes, as well as ordinary citizens, in their efforts to inspire a better future. (31)

By perpetuating a narrative in which Tillman represented the zenith of American virtue, President Bush was able to create a communicative space to funnel additional support for military action. When asked during a press conference about the inconsistencies in the governmental reports surrounding Tillman's death, President Bush simply stated, “I always admired the fact that a person who was relatively comfortable in life would be willing to take off one uniform and put on another to defend America” (Krakauer 322). The Tillman death narrative articulated a future in which citizens supported the president and the War on Terror in the eradication of American enemies.

### *Simplification of War*

Finally, the death narrative's discourse forwarded pro-war sentiment by presenting an oversimplification of war. The narrative's rhetoric allowed the American public to understand the War on Terror in accordance with governmental and military goals by creating clear purpose and easily identifiable enemies in an unfamiliar war. The Tillman death narrative was handy for those in positions of power because the American public was not accustomed to the kind of warfare present in the War on Terror. The *U.S. News and World Report* lamented this issue on May 7, 2007 by stating:

There was a time when America's wars came with a more simple, dramatic narrative, clear-cut battles, and identifiable victories. Today, war has changed. There are no front lines; convenient made for TV tales of stirring bravery are rare. While there is no shortage of valor among U.S. soldiers, tales of true heroes, it seems, largely go untold. For a government that must sustain public support, it makes the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan even harder to sell. (Whitelaw 39)

In contrast to World War II, or even the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the U.S. War on Terror suffered from heightened moral and logistical uncertainty. As mentioned above, the events of April 2004 stripped moral certainty from the U.S. war effort. The Tillman death narrative aided institutional forces in the government and military by giving structure to the War on Terror. This composition was stripped of considerable moral complexity which likely had the effect of increasing national support for war. As the Tillman Silver Star Citation clarifies, “[l]eading his Rangers without regard for his own safety, Tillman was shot and killed while focusing his efforts on the elimination of the enemy forces and the protection of his team members” (“Silver Star” par. 1). This concrete narrative did not include plans of exit strategies and there was no discussion of the challenges faced in the rebuilding of a devastated nation. Instead, within the Tillman narrative there was only the American hero fighting tirelessly to exterminate the enemy.

Enemies were easily identifiable, and purpose was undeniable from the government's perspective.

The Tillman death narrative positioned the American soldier and those in the public who supported the war as being on the righteous side of the conflict. As rhetorician Barbie Zelizer contends in her analysis of the reporting of the War in Afghanistan by the American news media:

One's own war tends to be depicted as clean, heroic, and just with images limited to those that are consonant with prevailing sentiments about the war. When such sentiments involve securing and maintaining support for the war, the images tend to reflect themes of patriotism, civic responsibility, and the good of the nation-state. They also tend not to be graphic. ("Death in Wartime" 31)

Although Zelizer's study was focused primarily on visual rhetoric, the same can be said of the Tillman case. Members of the government and military seem to have been attempting to create the same unquestionable dichotomy that was present during the Cold War to nurture domestic support. Institutional forces in the government and military attempted to sanctify Tillman's death in order to remove the unpopular realities of war. As the above analysis reveals, the death narrative was an incredibly "clean" version of war, in which the War on Terror was shielded from a considerable amount of criticism. As sport sociologist Samantha King argues:

In focusing on his [Tillman's] death rather than on why he died, these dedications constituted sacrifice as the goal rather than asking whether the sacrifice itself made any sense. That is, they allowed the sacrifices made by Tillman and by so many others to justify the war, regardless of its goals or the brutality of the everyday practices that sustain it. (534)

Sacrifice was such a paramount piece of the Tillman death narrative that audiences may have become distracted from the underlying militaristic ideology of the government's representation. This is reminiscent of rhetorician Stephen Klien's study of the war movie *Black Hawk Down* in which he concluded, "[c]learly, the audience is intended to empathize with the soldiers' sacrifices but not reflect critically on the rightness or wrongness of the conflict" (438). The

Tillman death narrative's discourse created an overtly simplistic explanation of war which helped to establish social unity and made public opposition of the conflict incredibly difficult.

The death narrative's discourse may be one example of a large scale communication strategy of the Bush Administration to sugarcoat the reality of war in order to gain and maintain, public opinion. In his analysis of President George W. Bush's wartime discourse, rhetorical scholar Herbert Simons argues that Bush utilized a melodramatic discourse:

[In it,] victims, villains, and heroes are joined together in a sanitized narrative, shorn of moral complexity. 'We' have an urgent mission to perform. We must act, not just out of fear but from a clear sense of moral purpose. Good must triumph, and good will triumph, but victory will not be easy. The enemy is wily, clever, and will stop at nothing. (185)

Bush's wartime rhetoric framed the War on Terror as a fight for the survival of western civilization in which America needed to be guided by a sense of moral intention. Tillman's death created the prospect for those in the government and military to collapse the multiple moral complexities and perspectives of war into one easily mediated form. In this way, the Tillman death narrative was a melodrama in which the American icon heroically died defending the eternal values of good against evil. The rhetorical necessity for good to triumph over evil helped the Tillman death narrative create a simplified moral purpose for the U.S. violence. Of course, while these representations of war are often desirable for societies involved in conflict, they are problematic since they work to justify death and destruction. Also, such narratives can perpetuate war by restricting the opportunities for society to participate in critical self-reflection. Simons warns that society should be cautious of "crisis rhetoric constructed on simplistic melodramatic binaries" (190). Such rhetoric has the potential to normalize war and violence as key to the national interest.

Great attention was paid by those in the government and military to remove certain realities of war that could have jeopardized the image of the war in the eyes of the American

public. The campaign to sequester unfavorable events was most apparent in regard to the friendly fire. The occurrence of fratricide is deeply oppositional to stories of war that focus on clear delineations between good and evil. As Krakauer contends:

But Death by so-called friendly fire, which is an inescapable aspect of armed conflict in the modern era, doesn't conform to this mythic narrative. It strips away war's heroic veneer to reveal what lies beneath. It's an unsettling reminder that barbarism, senseless violence, and random death are commonplace even in the most 'just' and 'honorable' of wars. (xxiii)

Although the Tillman death narrative revealed to society the unfortunate truth that American lives would be lost in the War on Terror, it failed to articulate the deeper truth that war is indeed senseless, devastating, and typically without reason. As the South African *Sunday Times* ironically published on April 25, 2004, “[r]eports of his [Tillman] death have come as a blow to Americans, just as they became exposed to the harsh realities of their campaigns half a world away after years of censorship by the Pentagon” (All-American Hero’s Death Hits Home Hard 1). Unfortunately, the “truth” about the war given to the American public was not the truth at all.

This chapter set out with the goal of exploring the form and function of the Tillman death narrative. After exploring the external context, internal structure, missing information, and institutional arguments it seems clear that the Tillman death narrative functioned as an inductive pro-war argument aimed at gaining public support for the War on Terror by those in the government, military, and news media. The Tillman death narrative elevated sacrifice and violence as important American values which rhetorically fostered the desire for revenge in society. Finally, the Tillman death narrative’s discourse acted by extending 9/11 and creating guilt, transferring morality to institutional forces in the government and military, and establishing an oversimplified version of war. With these narrative findings in mind, the next chapter turns toward the importance of sport and hegemonic masculinity in the Tillman death narrative.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MASCULINE EXEMPLAR: A “LONG-HAIRED, WILD MAN”

In the minds of many in the American public, Pat Tillman was different from other U.S. soldiers, largely due to his distinction as a professional football player in the National Football League (NFL). Indeed, Tillman’s football career was practically indivisible from his military service and patriotism within the death narrative. Regarding Tillman’s special athletic status, the first sentence of Miles’ press release for the Pentagon concerning his death read: “Today the military and sports communities alike mourned the loss of a Soldier who made the ultimate sacrifice in the war on terror” (Miles 2). Although Tillman was only marginally popular as a football player before his enlistment into the military, professional athletics were foundational in the creation of the Tillman legacy by institutional forces in the government, military, and news media.<sup>38</sup> Sport culture, as reflected by key athletic individuals, is inextricable from public culture. In their analysis of nationalistic rhetoric during the Persian Gulf, communication and sociology scholars Sue Curry Jansen and Don Sabo assert that “[s]ports, especially team sports, are vehicles for cultivating and displaying community and national values and identities” (13). Moreover, the intersection between masculinity and sport is important because as rhetorician Nick Trujillo writes, “[p]erhaps no single institution in American culture has influenced our sense of masculinity more than sport” (292). Thus, this chapter attempts to illuminate the tenor

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<sup>38</sup> As an Arizona Cardinal in the NFL, Tillman had received a dedicated local following due to his play for the Arizona State Sun-Devils in college. However, Tillman was relatively unknown at the national level until he decided to reject his forthcoming contract to enlist.

of the Tillman death narrative by giving specific theoretical consideration to the role of masculinity and sport culture.

I contend that the expression of hegemonic masculinity in the Tillman death narrative reveals the manner in which institutional forces in the government, military, and news media communicatively elevated white masculinity in American society. The death narrative framed Tillman as an individual deserving of emulation by current and future American generations in which his white masculine characteristics were considered worthy. The Tillman death narrative's discourse forwarded white nationalism that marginalized female and minority perspectives. Furthermore, while the Tillman death narrative superficially challenged the rhetorical nexus between sport and war, it further established the ideological connection between the NFL and the U.S. military.

This chapter begins by applying Trujillo's theory of hegemonic masculinity to the Tillman death narrative. Specific consideration is paid to the tenets of physical force and control, occupational achievement, and male patriarchy.<sup>39</sup> Then I examine the Tillman death narrative with regard to white nationalism and gender separation in American society. Finally, I explore the rhetorical connection between sport and war in the Tillman death narrative and its possible meaning for public support for the War on Terror.

### Hegemonic Masculinity

Trujillo's 1991 study of the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the reporting of baseball star Nolan Ryan is a seminal work in communication studies which helped to cement

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<sup>39</sup> The final two components of Trujillo's theoretical lens of hegemonic masculinity are the social emphasis on "frontiersmanship" and "heterosexuality" (291-292). The frontier frame was such a foundational part of the Tillman death narrative that it is the subject of chapter 5 focusing on the Frontier Myth and public memory. In regard to the heterosexuality tenet, I would argue that heterosexuality was undoubtedly implicit in the institutional construction of Tillman's occupational success and patriarchy. However, almost nothing was mentioned about Tillman's sexuality, except for rare references to his wife. Thus, any conclusions drawn from the heterosexual perspective would likely be conjecture at best.

the concept in the field's literature. Trujillo establishes an important ontological distinction between masculinity and hegemonic masculinity in this piece. According to Trujillo, "masculinity becomes hegemonic when it is widely accepted in a culture and when that acceptance reinforces the dominant gender ideology of the culture" (290). As a young man with chiseled features and athletic aptitude, Tillman certainly possessed numerous masculine features and was even named "Most-Masculine" in his high school (Fish "Timeline" 1). However, Tillman's possession of masculine qualities alone was not sufficient for his maleness to become hegemonic. Only through the discussion of Tillman's masculinity in ways that reinforced dominant gender ideology did his maleness become hegemonic. I contend that in the death narrative, Tillman was constructed as the "culturally idealized form of masculine character," and thus, his gender became hegemonic (Connell 83). As previously discussed, Trujillo's analysis of Ryan uncovered five common features found in the construction of hegemonic masculinity including physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality (291).<sup>40</sup> This analysis continues by examining the Tillman death narrative through this rhetorical lens in order to further substantiate the argument that the Tillman death narrative reflected hegemonic masculinity.

#### *Physical Force/Control*

The role of the male body is central to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. As gender scholar Michael Messner clarifies, symbolic representations of the male body have received an enhanced importance in popular culture as sexual inequality continues to be challenged in the public sphere ("Sports and Male Domination" 202). A primary characteristic of hegemonic masculinity is an emphasis on physical force and control. Trujillo contends that "masculinity is hegemonic when power is defined in terms of physical force and control" (291). For example,

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<sup>40</sup> See pages 24-7.

cultural critic Michael L. Butterworth's study of the 1998 home run race between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa found that McGwire's heroism was constructed in part "through a fascination with McGwire's size and strength" (233). McGwire's superhuman appearance became symbolic representation of his morality and the righteousness of the male body. Hegemonic masculinity elevates physical strength as the correct conduit to power.

As a professional football player, Tillman participated in one of the most physical and violent sporting professions imaginable. Football continually glorifies speed and strength as admirable abilities. The Tillman death narrative made repeated reference to his size and strength as evidence of his exceptionality. Institutional sources in the government, military, and news media framed Tillman's size as a revelation of his superior physical and moral character. Although Tillman was considerably stronger than the average person, the news media gave noticeable attention to his relative lack of physical ability in comparison to most football players. For example, *Time Magazine* of May 3, 2004, wrote:

He lacked both the size of a typical college linebacker and the speed of a running back, but he was dogged and smart. In his senior year Tillman was named Pac-10 Conference Defensive Player of the Year-no small trick for a guy who weighted 202lbs. in a world where your average lineman looks like a major appliance with a helmet. (Lacayo 39)

In comparison to other athletes who rely exclusively on physical strength and speed, the death narrative reported that Tillman had to make the most of his stature to overcome his disadvantages. Similar to the movie *Rudy*, the inspirational tale about an undersized football player at Notre Dame University, Tillman's greatness was reportedly achieved through a combination of ability and determination. Although many doubted his likelihood of success at the professional level, *The Boston Globe* of April 24, 2004, argued, "his [Tillman's] drive and heart on the football field quickly dispelled any reservations about his lack of size" (Cafardo 2).

Tillman's relative lack of size was thus a problem that he was able to overcome by relying on his strength of character.

Indeed, Tillman's most distinguishable physical feature in the death narrative was not really physical at all, rather it was his heart. *The Boston Globe* of April 24, 2004, called Tillman a "sui generis [...] a 5-foot-11-inch, 200-pound bundle of muscle and energy" (Ryan 1). Within the Tillman death narrative the American public was presented with an individual who had mastered both mind and body to assert his will. In this way, the Tillman death narrative packaged the male body through a multifaceted depiction of the physical aspects of power with the meta-physical facets of determination and will-power. Instead of just focusing on Tillman's physiological strength in comparison to the average person, the death narrative weaved Tillman's physical ability with his moral superiority. For example, *The Los Angeles Times* of May 4, 2004, interconnected Tillman's physical achievement and patriotism by publishing:

Pat Tillman epitomized values that Americans hold dear, including sacrifice, selflessness, modesty, courage, loyalty and determination. Although he lacked size and speed he became a star on the football field, first at Arizona State University and then with the Arizona Cardinals. (Tanenhaus 1)

In the death narrative, Tillman possessed both superhuman strength, and more importantly, superhuman will power to become the best individual possible.

By combining both physical and spiritual features, the death narrative's rhetoric presented Tillman's body as a rhetorical space which may have been implemented to gain support for the War on Terror. The narrative positioned the football star as a symbolic American "underdog" who used his physical strength, wit, and determination to overcome adversity. This was directly described with regard to Tillman's success on the football field; however I argue that Tillman's underdog status seemed to be also metaphorical to America's role in the War on Terror. By overcoming physical shortcomings in the face of more opposing competition,

Tillman was crafted as an ideal subject for military and national service. Concerning the constellation of force, the male body, and war, rhetorical scholar Shannon L. Holland wrote that “[a]s the prototypical masculine institution, the U.S military has historically defined itself in relation to the gendered body, especially during wartime” (30). The discourse of institutional forces in the government, military, and news media offered Tillman’s body as an argument for American exceptionalism on and off the field. Tillman’s exceptional physical body became the product of hard work and sacrifice, instead of merely natural talent.

By framing Tillman as an American underdog, it is possible that his death on the battlefield also allowed the U.S. armed forces and public the opportunity adopt the morally superior position of underdog in the War on Terror. For example, U.S. SSgt Chris Mandell posted on *legacy.com*: “The loss of any life in war, or conflicts short of war is tragic. It matters not who the person is. Losing Pat will make every one in the state of Arizona, the United States as well; thank God that there are HEREOS like him serving in today’s military. From this day forward I will always remember him” (Mandell 1). Marketing scholars Lee Phillip McGinnis and James W. Gentry reveal in their analysis of the role of underdogs for American society, “[t]he fascination Americans have with underdogs extends to famous personalities including Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan, Oprah Winfrey and Bill Clinton” who are defined by their “strong will or indefatigable spirit” (192-94). Through grit and indomitable will, Tillman’s body as represented in the death narrative’s discourse may have helped legitimize American society by standing as an example of superior physical and moral aptitude.

#### *Occupational Achievement*

Another common tenet of hegemonic masculinity is the presentation of occupational achievement as justification of superiority. Trujillo asserts that as a result of Western capitalist

society, hegemonic masculinity places great emphasis on the triumph of men in their careers (291). The Tillman death narrative spotlighted Tillman's occupational success in football, military service, and life in general.

Initially, the institutional focus in the news media on Tillman's gridiron success was a core aspect of the telling of his death. Tillman's NFL achievement is particular interesting because as Messner contends:

[S]ports have become one of the 'last bastions' of traditional male ideas of success, of male power and superiority over-and separation from-the perceived 'feminization' of society. It is likely that the rise of football as 'America's number-one game' is largely a result of the comforting clarity it provides between the polarities of traditional male power, strength, and violence and the contemporary fears of social feminization. ("The Meaning of Success" 196)

Football has achieved an important place in the American psyche which is reason why Tillman's occupational achievement in the NFL all the more significant as an indication of his superiority. In his analysis of Nolan Ryan, Trujillo discovered that occupational achievement in sports is most often denoted through the use of statistics (295). When discussing Tillman's achievement *Time Magazine* of May 3, 2004, noted that "[i]n 2000 Tillman established a team record of 224 tackles in a single season" (Lacayo 39). As a defensive safety for the Arizona Cardinals, Tillman's statistics substantiated him as a major contributor to the team's defense. Moreover, many news sources discussed the evolution of Tillman's career as indication of his achievement. For example, *The Washington Post* of April 24, 2004, wrote, "[h]e [Tillman] was drafted in the lowly seventh round in 1998 by the Arizona Cardinals, and converted to safety. Too slow to be a safety, he nevertheless set a club record with 224 tackles in 2000" (Jenkins 1). In the Tillman death narrative the public was presented with a quintessential rags-to-riches story, where a relatively small and underestimated football player was able to climb the latter of achievement through hard work and dedication. As the narrative made abundantly clear, Tillman was forced

to work for everything that he achieved much as a traditional blue collar laborer. Ultimately in a capitalistic society, according to Winston Van Horne in his work *Ethnicity and the Work Force*, money is largely seen as the greatest indicator of personal value (11). In Tillman's case, his hard work and dedication culminated in his “\$3.6 million-per-year NFL contract” with the Arizona Cardinals (Chisholm 1). The rejection of the multi-million-dollar contract was used by those in power to show Tillman’s personal achievement as well as his altruism in joining the U.S. military.

Once Tillman’s professional football career ended, a new career began as a U.S. Army Ranger. In keeping with the theme of occupational achievement, the U.S. news media and government indicated that Tillman had made substantial achievements in the military. At first, media outlets discussed the dedication Tillman needed simply to graduate from basic training and to become an Army Ranger. *The U.S. News & World Report* emphasized Tillman’s physical and mental achievement by writing, “Rangers train for about 20 hours a day, parachute at night under fire, sleep standing up and subsist for days in the jungles or mountains without food” (Zukerman 1). The intense physical pressures placed on Army Rangers during training and combat are reasons why they are an elite group of soldiers. Not just anyone can become a Ranger, and by graduating from the academy, Tillman had proven his masculinity and toughness.

Although it is fact that Tillman died on the battlefield, the death narrative’s discourse insinuated that his final moments were in fact successful. Navy Seal Steve White described Tillman’s purported achievement at the memorial service by saying:

The Silver Star and Purple Heart that Pat has earned will be given to Marie at a private ceremony. The Silver Star is one of this nation’s highest awards; the Purple Heart is rewarded for wounds received in combat. If you’re the victim of an ambush, there are very few things that you can do to increase your chances for survival, one of which is to get off that ambush point as fast as you can. One of the vehicles in Pat’s convoy could not get off. He made the call; he dismounted his troops, taking the fight to the enemy

uphill to seize the tactical high ground from the enemy. This gave his brothers in the downed vehicle time to move off that target. He directly saved their lives with that move. Pat sacrificed himself so that his brothers could live. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.<sup>41</sup> (Tillman 166)

The Silver Star and Purple Heart awards stood as adornments to Tillman's success on the day of his death. It is important to note that the military has rarely, if ever, awarded the Silver Star to a person killed by friendly-fire. Although the military "knew within a matter of days" that Tillman was killed by fratricide, the Silver Star and the narrative used to justify the award were both employed to illuminate Tillman's achievement as a soldier (U.S. House "Misleading Information" 12). Mary Tillman argued in her book that "the Silver Star was something given to him for public relations purposes and, in my opinion, to stir patriotic feeling" (297). The Silver Star nomination was the source of considerably controversy once Tillman's fratricide became public. The soldier's award is indeed suspicious because as *ESPN* pointed out on June 30, 2006, "[t]hough two other Rangers were wounded in the incident, no one else on the battlefield that day was awarded a Silver Star" (Fish "An Un-American Tragedy" 5). What made Tillman's actions particularly worthy of recognition that day in comparison to other soldiers remains undefined.

Within the Silver Star nomination's prose, the military reported that the situation was quite difficult for Tillman and his comrades. The death narrative revealed that it was Tillman's decisiveness and expert training that allowed for his fellow Americans to survive. As his Silver Star nomination text still states: "Through the firing, Tillman's voice was heard issuing commands to take the fight to the enemy forces emplaced on the dominating high ground" ("Army Awards Silver Star to Fallen Ranger" par. 6). This representation clearly positioned Tillman as a man who was in control of the battlefield and the lives of his fellow American

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<sup>41</sup> This description used by White was based on military accounts which he believed was true at the time of Tillman's funeral.

soldiers. Gender scholar Harry Brod asserts that “persisting images of masculinity hold that ‘real men’ are physically strong, aggressive, and in control of their work” (14). The Tillman death narrative’s rhetoric reflected the battlefield as Tillman’s office where he was able display his exceptional achievement. The Silver Star recommendation falsely declared that “[a]s a result of Tillman’s combat leadership and his Soldiers’ efforts, the platoon’s trail section was able to maneuver through the ambush to positions of safety *without taking a single casualty*” (“Army Awards Silver Star to Fallen Ranger” 1).<sup>42</sup> Tillman’s final moments became a vivid indication from the military that he was an exceptionally capable member of the armed forces who had achieved some of the highest distinctions possible.

Finally, the death narrative described Tillman as a man who was successful at life in general. On April 24, 2004, to offer perspective on the size of Tillman’s sacrifice, *The Washington Post* of April 24, 2004, claimed that Tillman “had all he could want before his enlistment. He had set the Cardinals’ record for tackles in 2000 and had been offered a three-year, \$3.6 million contract after his third year as a starter. He was a newlywed” (Elfin 1). Tillman’s youth, salary, and marital status all become criteria through which the American public was able to judge his worth. Institutional forces in the news media went all the back to high school to find evidence of Tillman’s superior achievement in the interpersonal aspects of life. *Newsweek* of May 3, 2004, explained, “[g]rowing up in San Jose, Tillman went to Leland High School. ‘All the girls loved him,’ says a former classmate, ‘and all the guys wanted to be him’” (Johnson and Murr 2). They also mentioned Tillman’s academic conquests as a collegiate student with a “3.84 grade-point average in marketing at Arizona State” (Johnson and Murr 1). Tillman was framed by those in the news media as an individual who had claimed dominance in the physical, mental, and personal realms of American society. In regard to his marital status,

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<sup>42</sup> Both Pat Tillman and Afghan Militia Sayed Farhad died that day.

Tillman's wife also became an achievement for Tillman as she was presented to the American public. As *The USA Today* of May 3, 2004, reported, "Pat Tillman was known for knowing what he wanted. He took a fancy to Marie Ugenti, the daughter of a team coach, and wound up marrying her" (Cava 1). This representation depicted Tillman's wife as a possession or accomplishment that Tillman saw and then claimed as his own.

By being as successful man in life, Tillman was revealed as an affirmation of American culture and society. Many institutional sources maintained that an exceptional individual such as Tillman could only have been created in a country as free and righteous as America. *The Kansas City Star* of April 23, 2004, argued, "[Tillman] had everything our freedoms promised, and he chose to defend those freedoms rather than drown himself in their excesses" (Whitlock 1). The liberties and rights of American citizens were believed to be the foundation through which Tillman was able to grow and prosper. As U.S. foreign policy turned to the goal of spreading democracy in the foreign lands of Afghanistan and Iraq, the American public was provided a potential reminder of the value of democracy. Tillman became a conduit through which institutional forces were given the opportunity to present the utility of American government and traditional national values. Thus, Tillman's achievements in football, the military, and life rhetorically reinforced institutional beliefs and cultural imperatives.

#### *Familial Patriarchy*

In hegemonic masculinity, "maleness" is frequently structured as patriarchal in which the husband/father is in charge of leadership and protection responsibilities within a familial context. Gender scholar Gerda Lerner argues in *The Creation of Patriarchy* that hegemonic masculinity is the "manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general" (239). In his

analysis of Ryan, Trujillo noted that news sources maintained hegemonic masculinity by discussing Ryan as the “breadwinner” and his wife as the woman “behind the scenes” (289-91). This division of labor worked to maintain a dichotomous gender separation between male and female. In the death narrative, relatively little was mentioned about the familial aspects of Tillman’s life. In fact, of the discourse analyzed in this thesis almost no consideration was paid by the government, military, or news media to Tillman’s wife.

Certainly, those in the media may simply have wished to give the Tillman family distance in order to recover. However, the only discussion of Tillman’s wife came in regard to Tillman’s accomplishments. Tillman’s marriage to Marie only illustrated his personal accomplishment and sacrifice as a male. Marie Tillman became another trophy that Tillman had achieved through his superior masculinity. The absence of Marie Tillman or her voice in the death narrative is problematic because as woman’s studies scholar Margaret Walker contends, “[w]hen women are silenced [...] they lose, or never gain, the most basic status of a moral agent” (178). Furthermore, the silencing of women perpetuates male hegemony by removing vocalized dissent from the social institutions responsibly for oppression. Therefore, masculinity is upheld as the social norm and standard through which others are evaluated. Throughout the Tillman death narrative there is little attention paid to marginalized groups, instead there is primarily the backdrop of masculinity.

In a broader U.S. national context, the death narrative also emphasized protection as another feature of traditional male patriarchy. In customary conceptualizations of gender, women are framed as “weak, delicate, and needing protection,” while men are seen as “strong and hardy protectors of women and children” (Martin and Collinson 289). In his exploration of American discourse leading up to the Revolutionary War, communication scholar James Jasinski

illustrates how the concept of “liberty” was described using feminine characteristics which supposedly required protection from male patriots against British brutality (149).<sup>43</sup> My position is that media and governmental sources constructed familial patriarchy by positioning Tillman as a protector of American lives and values. Within the discourse of the death narrative, Tillman was framed as a father figure sent to foreign lands to protect his American family at home. As *The Washington Post* of April 30, 2004, claimed, “[Tillman] died in an ambush in a dangerous, faraway country with the hope that people at home could live more safely” (“A Real Sports Hero” 1). Members of the American public were repeatedly portrayed as lazy, apathetic, and disinterested in national service in comparison to Tillman. As the narrative’s rhetoric indicated, while many Americans slept or opposed the War on Terror, Tillman was one individual who decided to defend national values against terrorism. Tillman’s youth, physical strength, whiteness, and masculinity almost certainly made him an ideal protector for the American way of life for those in power. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* of April 24, 2004, revealed that Tillman wanted to use his “strength” and “athletic ability” in hopes of preventing “another attack on [his] country” (Sheridan 1). Additionally, *The Washington Post* of April 24, 2004, eulogized Tillman by saying: “I will be thinking about how Pat Tillman died Thursday in a firefight with anti-coalition militia forces in Afghanistan, fighting for his country and to protect all of us from terrorism” (Loverro 1). Tillman’s masculine body was one source of his power and also a possible gauge by which those in the news media public could judge their protector.

Tillman’s career in the NFL was a rhetorical source of validation to justify his qualifications to secure American interests. As Jansen and Sabo note, “[f]ootball, especially professional football, is one of the most highly stylized displays of the contrasts between manly

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<sup>43</sup> Communication scholar Michael McGee also examines the feminization of liberty in: “A Feminization of Power.” *Communication Monographs* 47 (1980): 23-45.

men and vulnerable women in contemporary American culture” (10). The manliness Tillman displayed on the football field was easily transferable as an important asset in the fight against terrorism. For example, *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* of April 25, 2004, reported:

He [Tillman] didn't think it was important to be running down ball-carriers and defending against passes when there were lunatics out there trying to ruin our way of life. It was goodbye to the good life with the Cardinals and hello to the hard life of the U.S. Army. The enemy was no longer the Dallas Cowboys but the Taliban and Al Qaeda. (“Tillman a Hero, But Not Only One” 1)

While playing for the Arizona Cardinals, Tillman was in charge of defending the goal-line against the opposition. It was his responsibility to prevent the advancement of the other team and his decisions helped determine who won and lost. The narrative’s prose implied that by joining the U.S military, Tillman took on the responsibility to defend the homeland instead of the goal-line. Although Tillman lost his life on the battlefield, the rhetoric of the death narrative portrayed him as a patriarchal protector who died defending the lives of soldiers on the ground, as well as those living back home in the United States.

By analyzing the Tillman death narrative through the paradigms of physical force and control, occupational achievement, and familiar patriarchy, it becomes clear that the institution’s rhetoric mirrored hegemonic masculinity through its glorification of Tillman’s masculine. Tillman was presented as an ideal American, a “long-haired wild man” (Cafardo 2). It was Tillman’s masculinity that was forwarded as one desirable quality for which other Americans could strive. As Trujillo notes, “media representations of sport personalize hegemonic masculinity when they elevate individuals who embody its features as a role models or heroes worthy of adoration and emulation and when they castigate individuals who do not” (Trujillo 293). The hegemonic masculinity mirrored in the Tillman death narrative rhetorically established masculinity as a defining cultural characteristic of American society. Tillman’s

masculinity became one possible measure of his greatness and the greatness of America.

Consider a May 24, 2004, article by *The Christian Science Monitor*:

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are revealing the best that American has to offer, and the worst. *Pat Tillman epitomized the best.* We all know the story: turning down a \$3.6 million-per-year NFL contract to join the military out of a sense of duty for his country, and making the ultimate sacrifice. Thousands like him gave up good jobs and the safety and security of home following 9/11, in order to try to preserve a way of life. (Chisholm 1)

As the death narrative's discourse contended, Tillman's elite physical conditioning, his high level of occupational success, and goal to defend America against another 9/11 were all representative of his greatness.

#### White Nationalism and Masculinity Left Standing

Hegemonic masculinity and sport culture commonly focus on lauding the white male. In a post 9/11 context, scholars have noted the increased effort by those in the military and government to safeguard whiteness in American society. For instance, sport studies researcher Kyle W. Kusz asserts in his analysis of sport in the wake of 9/11, that hyper-masculine rhetoric employed by the George W. Bush Administration "was not only used as the cultural conduit to drum up popular support for the war on terror, but is simultaneously played a key role in setting the stage to initiate the racial project to resecure a central and normative position for white masculinity in American culture and society in the name of patriotism and love of country" (79). The discourse of the Tillman death narrative emboldened the position of the white male in society by elevating Tillman's death over those of minorities in the military. Of course, Tillman's whiteness was never directly referenced as indication of his superiority, or the pre-eminence of whites in the military. However, as Butterworth argues "[b]ecause whiteness is privileged as the cultural norm, it goes unmarked" (231). Tillman's whiteness became an

argument about the composition of the U.S. military force to counter critics of the War on Terror.

### *Poverty Draft*

The U.S. military is composed of many citizens of diverse ethnicities, classes, and religions. However, one reoccurring criticism leveled against the U.S. military is what is commonly referred to as the “poverty draft” in which minorities of lower economic status are faced with little option but to join the military. As political scientist Clarence Lusane explains, the poverty draft consists of “recruitment of poor and working-class youth into the military with financial and education incentives that are otherwise available to middle-and upper-class youth” (35). Some individuals have focused on the poverty draft as validation the war is immoral. For example, when discussing the make-up of the U.S. military the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* of May 17, 2004, argued that it “is simply wrong and unjust that the burden of service and sacrifice should fall so disproportionately on the poor and disadvantaged of our society” (Budiansky 2). Thus, the disproportionate composition of minorities in U.S. warfare has led to criticism from anti-war groups that government officials unjustly target these groups to die for imperialist goals (Wood 241).<sup>44</sup>

In the institutional representations, Tillman’s death was ciphered as an anecdotal argument against the existence of poverty draft. As the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* of May 2, 2004, explained: “Tillman’s decision harks back to a time when the rich and famous felt the obligation to serve in war, and enlisted or drafted notables served alongside common Joes” (Martz and Dart 1). This representation’s discourse presented Tillman as a selfish notable who was eager to fight with average Americans. Moreover, *The USA Today* of April 26, 2004,

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<sup>44</sup> For more discussion and perspective on anti-war movement in the U.S. and Canada see Lesley J. Wood’s “Organizing Against the Occupation: U.S. and Canadian Anti-War Activists Speak Out.” *Social Movement Studies* 3 (2004): 241-57.

reported, Tillman's death "helps refute claims by some who want to reinstate the draft that only the poor and minorities do the real fighting" ("The Public Face of Honor" 1). Tillman's death was viewed as proof by several news media outlets that at least some white rich people had sacrificed themselves for the War on Terror. Thus, the death of one highly influential white male was presented as evidence that equal burden was being paid in the defense of American by white upper-class individuals. Despite the fact that a vast number of minorities and poor citizens are put in danger during combat, the death narrative communicatively manufactured Tillman as a representative for an entire socioeconomic class. It goes without saying that very few white male millionaires joined the U.S. war against terrorism. Furthermore, Tillman's death became the backdrop against which minority soldiers were seen by many of those in the American public. As *Newsweek* of May 3, 2004, argued, "American troops tend to be honorable but anonymous—working class or poor, disproportionately black, brown or rural [...] But Tillman's death is a startling billboard of grief, a reminder that these lost soldiers—all of them, famous or not—had so much left to give" (Johnson and Murr 1). Tillman's death became a quintessential example illustrating the sacrifice of American soldiers. Unfortunately, this discourse positioned his gender and whiteness as normative for the U.S. military and further silenced the voices on the margins.

Although Tillman's whiteness may not have garnered much attention, it was elevated over the poor and minority soldiers who were and are still today an indivisible part of the U.S. military. The Tillman death narrative's rhetoric quieted poor and minority perspectives by constructing a white, rich, male as the zenith of American morality and citizenship. Because Tillman was a famous professional football player honored for his athletics and sacrifice, his

whiteness may seem irrelevant to his heroic status, and that is precisely the point. As Kusz points out, it is the subtly of the advancement of whiteness that is so effective:

The political brilliance of this discourse of White cultural nationalism is that it appears to be racially color-blind and neutral even as it resecures Whiteness and conventional forms of masculinity [...] Indeed, as the discourse is crafted as supposedly nothing more than an effect of a groundswell of public desire for inspiring stories of patriotism in this time of crisis, these narratives hardly seem concerned about advancing a reactionary racial and gender politics at all. (79)

The Tillman death narrative became a remarkably patriotic tale. The discourse of the Tillman death narrative may appear race-neutral by not directly mentioning Tillman's whiteness, but it is anything but color-blind since no other racial perspective is present. Instead of celebrating a fallen black male or a poor Hispanic woman who died in defense of the nation against terrorists, Tillman became the conduit through which militarization and warfare were understood by much of the American public. As sport sociologist Samantha King maintains, "the abstract men and women of the armed forces become concretized, if mythologized, in the figure of Pat Tillman" (532). Multiple voices and perspectives within the military and society were collapsed into the Tillman example of death and heroism where only white masculinity was left standing. The ethical concerns of this gross oversimplification may have been understandable if Tillman was actually killed by enemy forces that day in Afghanistan. However, since those in the government and military seemingly went to incredible lengths to make Tillman a hero for a death that did not occur it forces us to question what Tillman's life had to offer those in power. By acting as a selective window into the War on Terror, the Tillman death narrative elevated Tillman's whiteness and masculinity as valued characteristics in American society.

## Gender Separation in Society: Where Men Play and Women Watch

Along with the advancement of white nationalism, communication research has revealed that hegemonic masculinity and sport act to maintain strict gender separation.<sup>45</sup> Whether it is division of labor within the home or the partition of acceptable social occupations, hegemonic masculinity and sport create specific roles for both men and women. When discussing the role of sport to create clear, understandable gender division, Messner comments that through sport:

[M]ales are given the opportunity to identify--generically and abstractly--with all men as a superior and separate caste. Football, based as it is upon the most extreme possibilities of the male body (muscular bulk, explosive power and aggression) is a world apart from women, who are relegated to the role of cheerleader/sex objects on the sidelines rooting their men on. ("Sports and Male Domination" 202)

Football offers men the opportunity to physically and violently elevate themselves from women in society. As a member of the national football league, Tillman worked in a competitive arena where men played and women watched.

### *Manly Realm of Football and War*

In American culture it would be unsuspecting to see a woman playing professional football. Thus, Tillman's career as a professional football player helped to form a symbolic division between men and women. The rhetoric of the death narrative revealed the presence of gender separation by framing war as the exclusive realm of men. In the same way that females are not allowed to play professional football in accordance with societal norms, the Tillman death narrative's discourse created a rhetorically powerful gender separation in times of war when it came to military service. As the narrative suggested, it was partly Tillman's football career that prepared him to defend America from terrorists. By elevating Tillman as an exemplary citizen-soldier, the death narrative's discourse insinuated that perhaps it was male toughness that would be needed to succeed in the War on Terror, instead of the weakness

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<sup>45</sup> See pages 30-2.

traditionally attributed to women. The *U.S. News & World Report* of May 10, 2004, presented Tillman as the true representation of “guts,” “courage,” and “toughness” (Zukerman 1). As discussed in the above analysis, women were almost universally absent in the Tillman death narrative. While Tillman’s masculinity was being mostly glorified, femininity was brushed to the side. Jansen and Sabo assert that both warfare and hegemonic masculinity “trivialize and devalue women and their activities and interests” (9). Moreover, Holland concludes, “the rhetoric of female otherness and victimization perpetuates the devaluation of military’s women’s worth and insulates the all-male combat zone from female intruders” (Holland 32). Therefore, by removing women from consideration, the institutional narrative’s communication implicitly contended that women did not have as much to offer in warfare as masculine figures such as Tillman.

The environmental challenges present in war also seemed to threaten the involvement of women on the battlefield. *EPSN* wrote on April 24, 2004, that Tillman “fought with the Army Rangers in Eastern Afghanistan, chasing al-Qaida and Taliban into the dark corners and dangerous shadows” (Wojnarowski 1). In the fight against terrorism, Tillman was forced to encounter perilous environments and enemies. His gendered success as an Army Ranger presented by the death narrative’s discourse promoted masculinity as a necessary condition for military achievement and survival. By extension of the death narrative’s rhetoric, the deadly terrain of Afghanistan and Iraq was most likely no place for women. The institutional representations implicated that it would probably take men like Tillman to overcome terrorism and conquer the unknown territory of the Middle East.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The interconnection between the hegemonic masculinity found in the Tillman death narrative and the U.S. mission against terrorism will be further elaborated in the next chapter (See pages 116-26).

### *Moral Separation*

Through his life, death, sacrifice, whiteness, and masculinity Tillman was symbolically manufactured as a superior moral specimen. Tillman's engendered morality also impacted gender separation by contrasting with some media representations of women in the War on Terror. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal was morally perplexing for the entire U.S., however, the role of women soldiers in the scandal created specific questions concerning the place of women in the armed forces.<sup>47</sup> The photographs of Pvt. Lynndie England smiling while subduing a naked Iraqi man with a dog collar challenged traditional perceptions of femininity, leading some in the news media to inquire if women should be involved in military conflict.<sup>48</sup> In the wake of the Abu Ghraib abuse *The Washington Post* of May 7, 2004, declared that women participating in war "can be cruel. Very cruel [...] Female soldiers insisted that they could be as manly as male warriors [...] So we get female soldiers behaving as badly as their worst male colleagues?" (Britt 2). Of course the Tillman death narrative would not directly question the capabilities or morals of women fighting in the War on Terror. Yet, by symbolically raising Tillman's accomplishments as a standard of excellence, the death narrative communicatively established masculinity as one probable source of his success, at the cost of those who did not embody masculine characteristics.

### Sport/War Nexus

By working as a professional football player, as well as a specialized U.S. soldier, Tillman perfectly mirrored the rhetorical nexus between sport and war commonly found in the news media. Since the beginning of antiquity with the Greek Olympics, sport and war have been inextricably linked. Jansen and Sabo contend that "Sports, especially team sports, are

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<sup>47</sup> See pages 46-8.

<sup>48</sup> The issue of gender conceptualization in regard to the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal is one topic of Kelly Oliver's 2007 book *Women as Weapons of War*.

vehicles for cultivating and displaying community and national values and identities” (13). Thus, the Tillman death narrative’s rhetoric seemed to help create a conduit through which the national values found in sport were likely channeled to domestic support for the War on Terror. It is through sport that cultural imperatives are traditionally displayed and reinforced, including violence and war. As Messner maintains, “[f]ootball’s mythology and symbolism are probably meaningful and salient on a number of ideological levels: Patriotism, militarism, violence, and meritocracy are all dominant themes” (“Sports and Male Domination” 202). Thus, Tillman’s connection to the game of football was influential in the portrayal of dominant national values found within the death narrative’s rhetoric.

Sport has grown increasingly important for American society in a post 9/11 context because as communication researcher Phillip J. Chidester argues, after the terrorist attacks “[i]n simple terms, America needed heroes,” and sport has historically supplied “American society with succeeding generations of characters who, if not true heroes in the classical sense, certainly do embody heroic qualities” (353-58). The interconnection between sport and war has helped to create a rhetorical nexus which King describes as the “militarization of everyday life and, simultaneously, of the sportification of political life, in contemporary United States” (527). Following Tillman’s death, much discussion took place in the news media about the ethics behind the discursive overlap of sport and war. As a result, while many in the news media publicly decried the use of war metaphors in sports coverage, the Tillman death narrative functioned to substantiate the underlying ideologies connecting the NFL to the U.S. military. By creating a symbolic bridge between the American football and the War on Terror, the Tillman death narrative’s discourse only further cemented the sport/war connection.

### *Critiquing the Sports/War Metaphor in American Media*

Whether it is a quarterback throwing “bombs” with a “gun” of an arm or generals crafting “game plans” sport and war have a rich homological history. Following Tillman’s death, the institutional narratives fused his heroism with both athletic and militaristic perspectives. The official White House response to Tillman’s death read, “Pat Tillman was an inspiration on the football field and in his private life. As with all who made the ultimate sacrifice in the war on terror, his family are in the thoughts and prayers of the President and Mrs. Bush” (Johnson 1). The White House reaction was one of the first governmental reports to the American public and it immediately framed Tillman’s heroism in terms of football and military service. Before the White House press release, some within the Bush inner circle questioned whether it was correct or ethical to mention Tillman’s football career in regard to his sacrifice. In an email to Assistant White House Press Secretary Erin Healy on April 23, 2004, speech writer Noam Neusner wrote: “That Statement, as quoted, was ridiculous. Pat Tillman wasn’t a hero on the football field. He played football. But he died for his country. We shouldn’t try to tie the two together-he [Tillman] didn’t” (Neusner). Despite the recommendation from Neusner to refuse the conflation between football and the warfare, the Bush Administration’s rhetoric nevertheless positioned athletics and militarism as sources of honor, leadership, and morality.

While those in the U.S. government were quick to connect Tillman’s football and military careers, the media response was slightly different. When Tillman was killed, those in the media immediately became self-reflective about the implications of their rhetoric. As *The Washington Post* of April 24, 2004, asked “[w]hy did it take the death of Tillman for meanings to be restored, for play to become just play again, and war a soul-torturing affair, instead of bad metaphor” (Jenkins 1). While some in the news media found the common sport/war metaphors

inaccurate, others described them as unethical. *The New York Times* of April 24, 2004, declared, “nothing could more trivialize the mounting deaths of those less fortunate and less renowned--American soldiers and foreign civilians alike--than the tossing around of clichés like footballs on the virtues of one man’s heroism and sacrifice” (Araton 1). Those in the U.S. news media seemed to attempt to create a new dialogue on how to report professional athletics. Sport may have been metaphorical to war, however, as the death narrative’s discourse argued; true heroics and sacrifice came in the form of national service in the War on Terror. In his examination into the role of sport in the creation of contemporary heroism following 9/11, Chidester observes:

As the sole representative of league in the ‘War on Terror,’ Tillman embodied an actual, applied heroism that the rest of his compatriots simply could not match-and weren’t expected to. So invested had Americans become in this metaphorical expression of classical myth over time that they simply could not sacrifice their athletes on the altar of public service as was done during previous American military conflicts. (359)

Thus, the death narrative was able to symbolically benefit from the national obsession with sport, while also substituting public service as a superior value for the American public. This logic seemed to imply that while many individuals in society would be unable to play professional sports, they could be heroic by following Tillman’s example and supporting the War on Terror.

The media’s reaction to Tillman’s death may appear to have undermined the sport/war nexus. However, I contend that all damage was merely superficial. The sport/war rhetoric was still affirmed by those in the federal government and U.S. military. Moreover, although those in the media may have questioned the utility of using words like “missile” and “battle,” the underlying ideological structures behind sport and war remained unscathed. As sociologist Darryl Burgwin observes:

The audience was presented with parallel images of two warriors: the football player and the army ranger. The square-jawed intensity of the white, football Safety-the last line of the defense on the field-translated into the point man against foreign terror. In this representation, Tillman’s heroic selflessness is transferred to the nation-state and

consequently, America itself becomes heroic. Here Tillman stands in for the USA and the USA stands for Tillman. (90)

By creating a narrative in which Tillman symbolized the “best” qualities of America, the government, military, and news media’s discourse framed his actions as a moral standard for society to follow. The narrative’s rhetoric created an illustration in which Tillman represented the greatest qualities of American, at the same time that America embodied the best qualities of Tillman. No institutional sources dared to question the rampant sexism and homophobia found in the NFL, or the moral implications of the War on Terror. These questions would likely have been labeled as ‘unpatriotic’ or ‘un-American.’ Tillman’s morality and sacrifice were still evaluated based on the fact that he was once a member of the NFL. *The Associated Press State & Local Wire* of April 24, 2004, quoted NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue as stating that “‘Pat Tillman personified the best values of America and the National Football League’” (Baum 2). The death narrative symbolically rendered the values of the NFL and American society as largely undivided and equivalent.

The Tillman death narrative’s rhetoric also reinforced the sport/war connection by rectifying the morality of athletics through emphasis of those who participated in public service. Chidester clarifies that Tillman underscored the Bush Administration’s “effort to reify the heroic qualities of America’s athletes” (366). In an era marked with steroid allegations and crime, American sports stardom has lost much of its luster. However, in Tillman those in the news media likely viewed the opportunity to partially rebuild the damaged sports hero by comparing Tillman to sports legends of old who fought for their nation. *The St. Petersburg Times* of April 25, 2004, reported that “[b]ack in the day, when Ted Williams flew fighter jets, pro-athletes routinely performed military service. Those days are long gone, with the glowing exception of

Tillman” (Young 1). Therefore, Tillman was positioned as the resurrection of the hero-athlete for his decision to join the fight against terrorism.

Tillman’s death manufactured more than just a symbolic connection between the NFL and U.S. military. In fact, the Tillman death narrative’s powerful emotional appeals helped catapult an entire operation to solidify the marriage between sport and war. King observes that after the 2001 campaign “Real Men Wear Pink,” the NFL “shifted its philanthropic efforts toward militaristic and patriotic goals” (528). By placing more emphasis on patriotic endeavors, the NFL created a reliable audience within the U.S. military, and in return, the military found an avenue to boost recruitment. As political scientist David Altheide explains in *Terrorism and Politics of Fear*, “[s]ports is a great propaganda vehicle, and sports personalities are surefire sources of fan identification” (185). When Tillman died, the NFL and U.S. military decided to collaborate further by dedicating a military base in his honor. According to the NFL’s website:

Former Commissioner Paul Tagliabue came up with a fitting idea -- joining with the USO, the NFL’s long-time partner in saluting the military, to build the Pat Tillman USO Center at the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. NFL players Warrick Dunn and Larry Izzo officially dedicated and opened the Tillman Center in 2005. Since then, the Tillman Center has been serving as a place of rest and respite for Tillman’s brothers and sisters, the men and women of the U.S. armed forces. (Krichavsky 1)

Tillman’s name has thus become a permanent fixture between the NFL and U.S. military. The USO center that bears Tillman’s name was “funded by a \$250,000 donation from the NFL” (Fish “Timeline” 1). This joint military endeavor is a unique physical monument to the sport/war partnership in the U.S. and may denote a change in the relationship in which the NFL becomes a more direct investor in militarization. Previously the sport/war nexus was predominantly rhetorical and symbolic in nature. However, it is possible that in the coming years sports organizations could adopt a much more intimate connection with warfare. These types of

partnerships are certainly troubling as they would likely work to make perpetual war profitable, desirable, and common.

The Tillman death narrative's rhetoric reflected hegemonic masculinity as a defining national asset and value. The institutional narratives forged physical force, occupational achievement, and patriarchy to assert Tillman's masculinity and greatness on the public consciousness. Further, Tillman's embodied hegemonic masculinity positioned the white male as the normative moral center and advocated for continued gender separation in society. The narrative's discourse also indicates the possibility of a disturbing future for the sport/war nexus in American society. After attempting to elucidate the role of hegemonic masculinity and sport culture, the next chapter focuses on the relationship between the Tillman death narrative, the Frontier Myth, and public memory.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE TILLMAN MYTH AND THE CONTEST FOR HIS LEGACY

The bombastic language, epic story-line, and patriotic overtones found in the Pat Tillman death narrative quickly helped to escalate the football player's legacy symbolically to almost mythic status after his passing. The day of his death one citizen wrote in an online Tillman memorial: "I heard about Pat turning down a contract to defend our country and I was stunned that people like him really do exist. I wish that I could have known him personally...It would have been an honor" (Jones 1). Following the reports of his death, hundreds of impromptu memorials were created across the country to mourn his passing and to discuss his meaning for American society (Baum 2). Those in the government and news media were very involved in helping the American people determine the meaning of Tillman's sacrifice. Without discussing the role of the news media in facilitating the government's inaccurate reports of Tillman's death, *The American Journalism Review* wrote, "Pat Tillman was us, but he was superhero us" (Raquel 6). The narrative, as evidenced in the discourse embodying it, presented the soldier as a transcendent figure, who was also representative of core American values.

The American media's portrayal of Tillman is significant because news media not only influences social construction of events, but the media is also where the memory of those events are stored (Zelizer "Reading the Past" 233). Indeed, news media is one place where myth and memory traditionally intersect. In her examination of news frames during coverage of John F. Kennedy's assassination, communication scholar Carolyn Kitch reveals that "reporting became primarily a matter of ritual-of expressing sorrow, invoking and creating myth and memory, and

affirming and defining American values” (“Death in the Family” 298). The rhetorical construction of Tillman as a superhuman by those in the government, military, and news media is one justification for the application of mythic criticism in this chapter. Myth is a specific form of narrative, which rhetorician Leroy Dorsey maintains, “bridge[s] differences and promote[s] commonality among human beings by framing their everyday reality in an almost mystical way” (“Frontier Myth” 4). Myth is essential to the community-building process, and thus, the maintenance of dominant culture myths becomes a useful rhetorically tactic for those in power.

In this chapter, I argue the Tillman death narrative’s discourse created by those in the government and news media exemplified the culturally resonant “Frontier Myth” which likely increased domestic support for the War on Terror. Tillman was repeatedly revealed as a mythic hero who was sent to tame the wilds of the Middle East for the safety of the American people back home. This chapter continues to examine the death narrative through themes of the Frontier Myth as developed by Leroy Dorsey, Janice Hocker Rushing, and Mark West and Chris Carey. Next, my analysis turns to the influence of the Frontier Myth on the public memory of Tillman. I contend that in death, Tillman became a space of ideological contention where opposing forces attempted to claim his story as representative of their own political righteousness. By mapping the evolution of the Tillman legacy in portions of the public memory, I illustrate how the Tillman memory has shifted from conservative to liberal ideology.

### American Culture and the Frontier Myth

The Frontier Myth is one of the most foundational ideological representations of the origins of the United States and, as such, has saturated American popular culture (Carpenter 117). In sum, the Frontier Myth is the legend of America’s formulation in which rugged individuals conquered the perilous, unknown of the wilderness for the benefit of posterity. The

myth originates as far back as the Puritan voyages across the Atlantic Ocean for the purposes of gaining religious freedom. This exodus, or pilgrimage, as communication scholars Dorsey and Rachel Harlow explain “consecrated the settler’s journey into the wilderness, distinguishing America as a chosen nation with a divine purpose [...] and life-altering opportunities” (63-66). Hence, the Frontier Myth has helped substantiate long-lasting claims of moral righteousness and exceptionalism in America culture. Seminal in the Frontier Myth is the conqueror-hero involved in violent struggle against the environment (Dorsey 5). The hero in the myth is responsible for taming the wild for the benefits of society. Without his or her sacrifice and toil, civilization is hindered in its expansion and progress.<sup>49</sup> This has commonly been represented in popular American movie Westerns, where the lawman or cowboy uses self-reliance to pacify the so-called savage environment.

The Frontier Myth has taken on renewed importance in the United States since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In their analysis of President George W. Bush’s rhetoric, communication scholars West and Carey explain:

What is new following September 11 is the opportunity to witness a deliberative, sustained, and unyielding deployment of frontier fantasy, over three years of shifting political terrain leading to re-election, in response to a military attack on American soil, and in tandem-through a White House partnership, President Bush and Vice President Cheney put on a relentless display of cowboy rhetoric. (380)

This cowboy mentality may have been somewhat responsible for the creation of certain aspects of the Tillman death narrative according to governmental and military sources which highlighted violence and individualism. By commanding such a psychological connection to the American public, the Frontier Myth has the ability to be an incredibly persuasive rhetorical tactic for those

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<sup>49</sup> I will use “his” and “her” when describing the potential actions of mythic heroes, while acknowledging that in the traditionally Frontier Myth the hero is exclusively male. When describing mythic heroism, critic Janice Hocker Rushing typically only uses masculine pro-nouns. However, I include feminine pro-nouns to reflect the thinking that it is possible for frontier hero to be a female.

in power to motivate society. In order to validate this claim a more in-depth examination of the narrative with regard to the Frontier Myth is warranted. I begin by applying what Dorsey outlines as the three basic elements of the Frontier Myth: the frontier, the hero, and the narrative.<sup>50</sup>

### *The Frontier of Afghanistan*

The first component of the Frontier Myth is the space in which the story takes place, commonly referred to as the “frontier.” The challenges and dangers of the frontier create the conflict through which the plot of the myth develops. It is the frontier setting that “turns some individuals into martial heroes who, because of their epic struggles, come to symbolize American values such as progress and prosperity” (Dorsey 2). The concept of the frontier has evolved considerably throughout American history, moving from the Wild-West all the way to outer-space. The scenic composition of the frontier is an important consideration for communication scholars because as rhetorician Rushing states: “America has constantly sought new frontiers as the old are tamed, and as long as it has found them, has preserved the backdrop of its identity even as drama has evolved” (“Mythic Evolution” 266). Thus, although the specific frontier may have changed over time, the core components of the Frontier Myth have transcended any one specific setting.

In the death narrative’s discourse, Tillman’s frontier was the Middle East in general, and the nation of Afghanistan specifically. It was there that “[o]n the evening of April 22, 2004, Pat’s unit was ambushed as it traveled through the rugged, canyon terrain of eastern Afghanistan” (“About Pat Tillman” par. 10). The dangerous and mysterious terrain of Afghanistan was the backdrop of Tillman’s heroic actions. The April 24, 2004, *New York Daily News* painted the picture by writing:

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<sup>50</sup> See page 34-37.

The snow has melted in most of the treacherous terrain of eastern Afghanistan, meaning military activity is, in words dropped often in sporting circles, at fever pitch. Tillman, along with this elite Special Forces unit, would have spent much of his time in caves, or the small mountain villages near Khost, alternately handing out candy to refugee children or hunting for Taliban and al Qaeda forces along the Pakistan border. (Olson 1)

The environment of Afghanistan was in stark contrast to the United States where Tillman had grown up. Juxtaposed to the sunny industrial cities of southern California of his birth, Tillman was killed “close to the mud brick village of Sperah” (Winter 1). This variation in physical surrounding is important because in the Frontier Myth the hero must leave the comfort of his or her home and “face the dangerous of an unknown universe” (Dorsey and Harlow 65). Tillman’s decision to leave the United States to fight terrorism in Afghanistan helped reflect the vast differences between these two societies.

In her analysis of visual rhetoric in American news media after 9/11, rhetorical scholar Dana Cloud posits that common representation of Afghanistan presented the nation as “uncivilized” and “barbaric” in order to justify American imperialism (290-91). For many Americans, Afghanistan and the Middle East was conceptualized as an incredibly foreign and mysterious setting. When discussing the starkness of Tillman’s choice to leave America for the Middle East, *The USA Today* of April 26, 2004, offered the following:

I kept seeing the selfless, square-jawed vision of Pat Tillman. Walking away from professional sports and millions of dollars. Going off to boot camp. Earning that Special Ops beret as an Army Ranger. Trudging through the dust, destruction and danger of Afghanistan. And, a few days ago, paying the ultimate sacrifice: Dying for us.” (Saraceno 1)

The death narrative’s language distinguished between Tillman’s old environment, a free capitalistic country where he was making millions of dollars, and a so-called third world nation characterized by “dust” and “destruction.” Such descriptions rhetorically position U.S. society

as civilized in comparison to those in Afghanistan. This symbolism likely resonated with American audiences, for as cultural critic Michael L. Butterworth asserts, “[w]estern cultures commonly respond to myths of progress” (230). The Tillman death narrative’s rhetoric elevated U.S. morals and customs by portraying the Middle East as deadly and foreign.

The mountainous nation of Afghanistan posed numerous physical and mental challenges to Tillman and his fellow soldiers. Extreme temperatures, jagged rocks, and scarce resources all helped make the U.S. mission formidable. Along with the hazardous terrain, Tillman was also threatened by those he was hunting. In a manner similar to stories of early American trappers or cowboys, Tillman was on the hunt in Middle East for the terrorists responsible for 9/11. As *ESPN.com* of April 24, 2004, described, “[h]e [Tillman] fought with the Army Rangers in Eastern Afghanistan, chasing al-Qaida and Taliban into the dark corners and dangerous shadows. In the end, he turned out to be one more soldier returning home to the sad, sad sound of Taps” (Wojinarowski 1). As this representation illustrated, Tillman’s death was largely accredited to the dangerous environment in which he was working. That the setting of the war-torn nation of Afghanistan was incredibly relevant for the Frontier Myth’s structure because “the traditional myth transformed the frontier-universe into a violent battleground where settlers regressed into a state of savagery to survive against Native ‘savages,’ but who redeemed themselves by struggling for the greater democratic good of the fledgling nation” (Dorsey and Harlow 63).<sup>51</sup> By presenting Afghanistan as a formidably threatening frontier, the Tillman death narrative offered the public an explanation of how an individual of his stature could be killed. Thus, terrorism is not the only enemy in the narrative, but also the environment of Afghanistan itself.

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<sup>51</sup> In their article Dorsey and Harlow are literally discussing American Indians when referencing native “savages,” instead of those individuals within the frontier of Afghanistan. However, while the specific groups and locations are different, their argument can be easily extending to Afghanistan because U.S. and Middle Eastern societies were placed within the same binary of civilized/savage.

### *Pat Tillman: Our Mythic Hero*

Although the frontier may be the backdrop of the Frontier Myth, the hero is by far the focus of the narrative. It is the hero who fights to tame the wilds for the benefit of society and it is s/he who acts as an exemplar of cultural excellence. The hero is the symbolic extension of the will of the society that he or she represents. According to communication researcher Phillip J. Chidester, “heroes emerged as the narrative embodiment of society’s yearnings to act in the real world, to transcend its own human failings, and to achieve its potential for otherworldly greatness” (355). In societies undergoing great change and uncertainty, heroes traditionally act by offering guidance. West and Carey maintain that after 9/11 “[a] hero was needed, specifically a frontier hero, to push back the inrush of trauma with a flood of other memories—memories of a shared, defining cultural myth” (383). For those in the U.S. government and military, the high level of uncertainty following 9/11 fomented the need for a mythic hero. Tillman became a perfect candidate after his death. I argue, here, that the death narrative’s rhetoric constructed the football player as a national hero who was representative of the communal Frontier Myth.

Of course, not just any person is worthy or skillful enough to succeed in overpowering the frontier. Only special individuals with exceptional qualities can become mythic heroes. Joseph Campbell, the symbolist largely responsible for modern mythic criticism, asserts that heroes must be people who are elevated above the rest of society through their accomplishment of “something beyond the normal range of achievement and experiences” (124). The Tillman death narrative presented an inspirational individual to the American public who was successful in multiple arenas. *The Los Angeles Times* of April 24, 2004, eulogized Tillman by calling him “one of a kind—a meticulous thinker, modest, friend ad ferocious tackler” (Farmer et al. 1). Moreover, Tillman had the strength of character to accomplish great fame without getting

drowned in its “excess” (Whitlock 1). In the mythic tradition, individuals become heroes through “rite[s] of passage [...] resolutely undertaking something of transcendent importance (Dorsey and Harlow 64). Rites of passage were reflected throughout most institutional representations of Tillman’s death, whereas he was presented as the quintessence of American strength and morality. Tillman’s accomplishments on the football field were a predominant illustration of his superior strength and will. For example, when describing Tillman’s physical prowess in college *Time* magazine of May 3, 2004, reported:

He lacked both the size of a typical college linebacker and the speed of a running back, but he was dogged and smart. In his senior year Tillman was named Pac-10 Conference Defensive Player of the Year-no small trick for a guy who weighted 202lbs. in a world where your average lineman looks like a major appliance with a helmet. (Lacayo 39)

Not only was Tillman an award winning football player, but his success also required that he defeat larger, more powerful opponents. Tillman’s career as a football player is significant to the Frontier Myth because as Butterworth notes, “[s]port is an enactment of American mythology [...] because it is driven by performance, the ability to conquer uncharted territory, and the prominence of individual acts of greatness” (232). Through its glorification of physical conquest, American football is incredibly metaphorical to the Frontier Myth. Also, although football is a team sport, Tillman’s actions were judged individualistically by those in the news media. Another rite of passage revealed in the narrative was Tillman’s “rigorous[s] train[ing] in obscurity to become an elite solider, a Ranger, to defend the principles of a nation suddenly under attack” (Hunt 1). Within the narrative, the masculine institutions of the NFL and U.S. military were training grounds for Tillman to assert his masculinity and evolve from common citizen to hero.

The solitude of Army training, along with the individualism of professional sports, reflects a key component of the frontier hero: rugged individualism. In order to tame the frontier, the mythic hero must be a self-reliant trailblazer who does not strictly conform to societal expectations. Rushing elucidates this notion in her analysis of the American Western myth:

To cope with the harshness and savagery of the frontier environment, he must above all be a rugged individualist. However, in order to settle and civilize the frontier, he must continually face the demands of the community for cooperation and conformity. The cattleman, one of the myth's most enduring heroes, was both a pioneer and a man of property. In almost all expression of the myth, the Western hero must somehow deal with the paradox of being alone in a community. If he does not manifest rugged individualism in all of his crucial actions, he cannot be a hero. ("American Western Myth" 16)

Rushing maintains that it is nearly impossible for an individual to be a mythic hero unless they represent rugged individualism. Individualism was an important value for White House speech writers who were partially responsible in creating the Tillman death narrative's rhetoric. On April 23, 2004, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan wrote an email to White House Speech Writer Peter Wehner calling Tillman's death a real "opportunity for the president to talk to kids" about "listening to and following your own drummer" (Noonan). The White House's preference to elevate Tillman's rugged individualism was also reflected in the news media. The *Charleston Daily Mail* of April 24, 2004, depicted Tillman as the prototypal "non-conformist [...] a 27-year-old with fame and fortune who traded both for a life in a war zone ("Tillman a Unique Individual" 1). Further, the mythic hero is stuck in a precarious position where he or she must stand out as an extraordinary individual, while simultaneously symbolizing communal standards and imperatives. In the death narrative's discourse we see a similar paradox, given that Tillman was presented as everyone, and no one, in American society. At the same time that

many in the government and news media called Tillman an spectacular American citizen, the April 24, 2004 issue of *The St. Petersburg Times* also asserted that “He [Tillman] represented us all” (Shelton 1). The solution to this paradox, according to West and Carey “lies in defining the needs of the frontier community (America) as the goods delivered by the individual frontier hero (security)” (396). In the death narrative, Tillman’s articulated goals to fight terrorism and prevent another 9/11 attack aligned with the community goal of national security Thus, the governmental and mass media representations of Tillman, framed him as a hero representing individualist freedom and collectivist security.

The rhetorical tension between individualism and collectivity as represented in the frontier hero is further manifested in the aims of the individual. In the Frontier Myth, the rugged individualist cannot be selfish, for that would defeat the moral of the narrative. Rather, the frontier hero must be willing to give his or her life for the greater good as illustrated by “trappers, farmers, Indian-hunters, and others who left civilization to establish communities in a barbaric wilderness” (Dorsey 4).<sup>52</sup> Thus, selfless sacrifice is one characteristic that separates the frontier hero from others in society. As discussed in length, sacrifice was a primary focus of the narrative. As *The Seattle Times* of April 25, 2004, illustrated, “Pat Tillman made the ultimate selfless sacrifice, surrendering his life fighting for his country” (Kelley 1). Tillman’s most pronounced sacrifice was certainly the loss of his life on the battlefield. Although the death of the mythic hero might seem to undermine his or her achievement, in many cases it is quite the opposite.

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<sup>52</sup> Once again Dorsey is not making specific reference to the frontier of Afghanistan, but rather the traditional characteristics of the frontier hero in American history. Yet, the hero’s embrace of danger for the greater good can be applied to numerous situations and contexts.

Often it is death that solidifies a person's symbolic greatness for those still living. In his analysis of public mourning rituals in the wake of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination, psychologist Barry Schwartz argues that "[a]ssassination transformed Abraham Lincoln from a controversial president into a sacred emblem of society" (343). Lincoln's death helped alter his legacy from contentious leader to national icon. It is unlikely that Lincoln would have had the same iconic impact on American consciousness had he not been assassinated. Lincoln's death was further evidence that he was an important individual who sacrificed his own well-being for the survival of the American union. The importance of death, especially as it leads to martyrdom, is a reoccurring theme in myth. While discussing the historical interaction between masculinity, myth, and militarism, historian Leo Braudy contends that death is a key indicator of the worth of the masculine mythic hero who comes to represent dominant social values:

As the Greek hero had to die young in the midst of battle in order to be considered a hero in song and legend, so one powerful form of masculinity is perpetually nostalgic in its judgments and standards. *All good men are already dead. That's how we know they're good.* They may be dead, but their names and the masculinity they embodied live on it inspire future generations, and to ensure that other young, unmarried boys, who are not yet part of the settled social order, will go to war in the effort to be real men. (6)

In the Greek tradition, heroes were practically expected to die young while engaged in battle in order to prove their worthiness of being remembered by the living. Therefore, death becomes one way that society is able to view the merit of the individual and reinforce cultural imperatives that the person assumedly defended.

It was not just the fact that Tillman died, but instead, it was the manner of his death that was so important for influencing the American public. *The San Antonio Express-News* of April 24, 2004 summarized Tillman's heroism in the final minutes of his life by declaring that he "always put a fight" even to the bitter end (Zwerneman and Orsborn 1). Moreover, the military's

official citation for Tillman's Silver Star reads: "As they crested the hill, Tillman directed his team into firing positions and personally provided suppressive fire with an M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon machine gun" ("Army Awards Silver Star to Fallen Ranger" 1). The description of the weapon is relevant because marksmanship has been a common skill of frontier heroes who traditionally wielded iconic six shooters or rifles. The death narrative's depiction of Tillman's epic death helped manufacture his mythic hero status by paralleling the old-west and venerating his death. Communication scholar Darryl Burgwin explains: "Traditionally, going to war for your country has been the penultimate cost of citizenship—the ultimate being death while fighting" (91). Tillman's heroic last moments in the death narrative represented the kind of heroic death and sacrifice common in classical renderings of the Frontier Myth.

In death, the mythic hero ceases to be a person, and instead, becomes a symbol and inspiration for those still living. The values that the hero represents are supposedly passed on to society as indication that while the hero is dead, their spirit is still alive in the nation he/she protected. The transfer of knowledge becomes the validation of core national beliefs and values. The rhetoric of institutional forces in the government alluded to the desire to replicate Tillman's symbolism. In the fall of 2004, President Bush delivered a brief television statement during a halftime ceremony for Tillman stating that, "Pat Tillman will always be remembered and honored in our country" (Fish "An Un-America Tragedy" 3). Many individuals remarked that although Tillman was gone, his essence would be passed on and continue to live strong in the future American generations he helped protect. During the nationally televised memorial, sports personality Jim Rome claimed that he wanted his "son to be like Pat" (Tillman 157). The institutional reporting from the government, military, and news media helped craft a Tillman legacy symbolic of national values that many wanted to maintain. In another example one

American citizen posted on a *legacy.com*: “America has lost a true friend and a great patriot. We should never forget what Pat stood for...FREEDOM and LOVE OF COUNTRY. He will be missed...but not forgotten” (Sweigart 1). Of the multifarious values that the Tillman death narrative explicitly and implicitly embodied, one in particular – violence – was foundational to the plot of the Frontier Myth.

The overt goal of the Frontier Myth and the hero is conquest, which is accomplished almost uniformly through war. The cowboy or frontiersman is not expected to hold peace talks with enemies on the frontier. This contributes to a stark dichotomy in the Frontier Myth between the forces of good and evil – both of which were an omnipresent aspect of the Tillman death narrative. Consider for example the May 2, 2004, issue of *The New York Daily News* which remarked that Tillman put himself in harm’s way to “fight the evil of our time, terrorism” (Zuckerman 1). The presence of alleged wickedness is fundamental to the Frontier Myth, since Rushing contends that the pioneer hero must struggle against the forces of evil (“Mythic Evolution” 271). Despite the reality that during the campaign the frontiersman is likely to commit acts of violence in the mission, his or her actions become justified under the guise of societal progress.

In this way, the Frontier Myth affirms death and destruction as long as it occurs as the hands of the mythic hero. Within this hypocrisy, Carpenter contends that “America’s cultural counterpoint of ‘savagery’ is the frontiersman’s victorious combat in the struggle to settle the continent” (9). Furthermore, the frontier hero’s deeds are contrasted against the actions of the uncivilized savages of the frontier. This makes the hero’s race a central thematic component of the frontier myth because whiteness “works alongside the charge the white Christians [are] charged with civilizing and taming the savage wilderness” (Butterworth 231). In the case of the

Tillman myth, the morality of the soldier was rarely questioned, in part because the cultural prevalence of the Frontier Myth gives implicit approval to war. Numerous analogies and references have been made in popular culture reinforce “contemporary American combatants as frontiersmen” (Carpenter 8). At the time of his death, the government, military, and news media were almost unanimous in their support for Tillman and the other soldiers fighting in the War on Terror. As reported by Mary Tillman, fellow soldier Steve White concluded his eulogy to Tillman on behalf of the U.S. military by quoting the bible verse Matthew 5:9: “Pat sacrificed himself so that his brothers could live. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God” (166). The morality of the War on Terror was not given a fully critical examination by many in the news media and public, perhaps partly due to the rhetorical connection between the Tillman narrative and the Frontier Myth.

Tillman’s popularity may have helped to create a more accepting mask for U.S. imperialism. Darryl Burgwin explains, “[u]pon his death, Americans looking to put a human and heroic face on America’s occupation of Iraq embraced his [Tillman’s] story of patriotic self-abnegation” (89). Although Tillman reportedly died in heroic battle, the death narrative’s discourse indicated that because the war had not ended more work by American forces would be necessary.

### *The Tillman Drama: Unfinished Business*

The final component of most myths is the narrative, which links the frontier to mythic hero. Rhetorical and mythic scholars typically describe the narrative component of the myth as a form of drama.<sup>53</sup> For rhetorician Kenneth Burke, “[t]he origin of myth [...] is in drama” (“The Philosophy of Literary Form” 412). In summary, the drama of the Frontier Myth unfolds when the hero leaves the comfort of his or her home for a more unfamiliar and dangerous environment.

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<sup>53</sup> See page 36-7.

Once immersed in the challenging new setting, the hero then becomes stronger and more prepared from his or her experiences to conquer the frontier. Finally, a transcendent hero comes back to the aid of the society he or she left by achieving the goal of taming the wilderness. Through this drama the achievements and sacrifices of the individual hero are enjoyed by the entire society he or she represents (Carpenter 128). The Tillman death narrative closely reflected this mythic format but departed slightly from usual portrayals of the Frontier Myth by presenting a frontier that had yet to be fully claimed.

In the first stage of the drama, Rushing describes that “the cowboy hero elevates his ego, represented as rugged individualism, to such prominence that he cannot live in community” (“Ronald Reagan” 417). This is where the hero realizes that he or she is different from the rest of society and feels compelled to undertake a mission of special significance. Of course, the mythic hero must freely elect to participate in the perilous journey into the wild. The discourse of the death narrative articulated that Tillman was not forced to join the military, but rather had happily elected to subject himself to danger. When discussing Tillman’s motivations to serve, the April, 24, 2004, *The Boston Globe* published that “[c]learly, the Tillman way is to embrace a principle and act on it. Pat Tillman was not motivated by fame or fortune, but by a strong sense of honor. He was bright and educated. He had options in life. He was thoughtful and reasoned. He knew what he wanted, and he surely knew the risks his choice entailed” (Ryan 2). As this example indicates, going to the Middle East to fight in the War on Terror was what Tillman “wanted.” This discourse may have pacified the realities of war for many in America by presenting conflict as something the Tillman desired. As one American citizen editorialized in the May 19, 2004, *Richmond-Times Dispatch*: “One can only suppose Tillman inherently knew that although war is horrible, some ideals are worth fighting and dying for. A fool he was not. He

was a brave man who died a genuine hero, as have all who died defending what they loved, cherished, and believed in" (Whitlock 1). The narrative's language revealed Tillman as an exceptionally unique member of society who felt compelled to leave home and conquer the frontier in Afghanistan.

Next, once the hero chooses to leave the comfort of home, he or she must accomplish rites of passage to prove self-worth and develop important skills needed to overcome the frontier. The drama within the narrative's rhetoric presented the audience with multiple perspectives indicating that through adversity Tillman had gained the skills and knowledge needed to become a hero. As *The San Francisco Chronicle* exemplified in its April 27, 2004 edition:

"Tillman walked away from a seven-figure income in professional football to enlist in the U.S. Army soon after the terrorist of Sept. 11, 2001 [...] Tillman was known for an intense work ethic [and] he brought that mettle to the military, competing for and landing a spot with the Army Rangers." ("An American Hero" 1)

Whether it was the rejection of a multi-million dollar contract, leading his team in tackles, or graduating for Army Ranger school, the narrative's discourse described in numerous ways how Tillman had developed into a heroic figure through his decisions and actions in life. However, the success on the football field took place when Tillman was still in the role of civilian.

Most vitally, the narrative's discourse elevated Tillman's feats on the battlefield to highlight his heroic status. The clearest evidence of Tillman's rite of passage was his death. *The Seattle Post Intelligencer* eulogized Tillman on April 24, 2004, by declaring: "Pat Tillman will forever be an American hero because he went to war and died. There is no more generous gesture in our culture" (Levesque 1). Typically in the Frontier Myth, the challenges of the environment are able to bring out the best within the hero. In the case of the death narrative's rhetoric, the war-torn frontier of Afghanistan allowed Tillman the opportunity to demonstrate his

greatness and accomplishment. Of course, Tillman's death would have noticeable implications for the resolution of the drama within the Frontier Myth.

The final stage of the Frontier Myth's dramatic structure is when the epic hero accomplishes his or her goal and is able to return to society. As Rushing asserts, "in the truly transcendent phase of the New Frontier, a reintegrated hero becomes consubstantial with the infinite scene s/he occupies and dissolves the dialectic between hero and enemy" ("Ronald Reagan" 1986, 417). Even in cases when the hero unfortunately loses his/her life, his/her actions are given credit for pacifying the frontier for the other members of society. However, in the Tillman death narrative's symbolic dramatism this finally stage was never fully realized since the enemy had yet to be completely vanquished and the mission remained unfulfilled. It is in this final stage of the Frontier Myth's structure that the Tillman death narrative departed from the traditional epic paradigm because the frontier had still yet to be tamed. This discursive discovery is significant since it may have had an impact on the public's will to support the War on Terror and finish the fight.

Although the U.S. government, military, and news media's rhetoric communicated to the public that Tillman died a hero's death and was symbolic of American values, the responsibility for finishing his mission was tacitly reflected back to the American public. As the *Philadelphia Inquirer* explained, "[t]he bullet that found Pat Tillman didn't care why he was there, or what he could have been doing instead. It didn't care about freedom or commitment or the greater good. The bullets don't care. That's why we must" (Sheridan 2). Additionally, *The San Diego Union-Tribune* of May 2, 2004, asserted: "The terrorist jihadis imagine that Americans will shrink from the protracted war they have declared against us. They're wrong, dead wrong. Pat Tillman is the brave face on a country that won't run" (Caldwell 1). These accounts argued that Tillman's loss

would not deter the American public from continuing to fight until all terrorists were eliminated. Overwhelmingly, Tillman's death symbolized a renewed war effort for many in the American public. For example, the comments of one Florida resident named Luis Sigala are illustrative of this sentiment: "If someone like Pat Tillman would serve his country and give up so much to be the person he wanted to be, takes a special person. He is one of the reasons I joined the military" (Sigala 1). Since the individuals responsible for killing Tillman were not killed or captured, the death narrative's rhetoric argued that more effort would be needed to see his legacy come to fruition. West and Carey argue that institutional forces in power often manipulate "[t]he setting, characters, and actions of the frontier narrative" to fit their own specific tactical needs (401). It is difficult to say whether the government purposefully manipulated Tillman's death to gain domestic support. However, the mythic structure present in the death narrative likely influenced public support by giving society a strong emotional tether to combat. Consider for instance the May 10, 2004, issue of *the U.S. News & World Report* which stated Tillman "raised our expectations about what we can do, and he has given American yet reason to see its mission through to the end" (Zukerman 2). In his analysis of the rhetorical union between soldiers and frontiersmen in contemporary society, Carpenter clarifies:

In World War II, frontier metaphors for combat helped sustain morale to fight Nazis as well as perpetrators of Pearl Harbor attack and the Bataan Death March. For total war against totalitarian evil, resorting to proven efficacy of those figurative analogies may have been righteous. But Hitler's Holocaust was one thing; armed support of a political faction in Central America or protecting oil tankers in the Persian Gulf is another. (15)

Although the War on Terror represented a very new conflict for the American public, the mythic nature of the Tillman death narrative drew on traditional cultural values and norms which likely influenced nation unity for war. The Frontier Myth represented in the death narrative shifted its

rhetorical significance by suggesting that the American public was needed to finish the fight against the evil forces of terrorism through service and support.

By modifying the Frontier Myth's composition in such a way that there was no overall victory, the death narrative's discourse was a powerful message insinuating the need for national unity. The drive for national conciliation was demonstrated in the *San Jose Mercury News* of April 23, 2004: "If you talked to anyone who played football alongside Tillman, they would tell you he was the ultimate football teammate. And in the end, he was the country's ultimate teammate" (Purdy 1). Of course, the death narrative's mythic discourse was heavily reliant on an inaccurate account of Tillman's death. If it had been reported correctly by those in the government and military that Tillman was shot three times in the face by fellow Americans, instead of epically embattled with enemy forces, the myth that was presented to the public would have been considerably different. As Lipsitz maintains, the construction of mythical constructs in favor of actual representations is normally an attempt by those in power to "impose cultural unity and obedience to the present government" (27). The high level of nationalism following Tillman's death would have been incredibly welcomed by those in the government and military interested in perpetuating war. However, for a more holistic understanding of the impact of the Tillman death narrative it is useful to investigate the composition of his myth in the memory of the Americans that he left behind.

### The Ideological Battle for Tillman's Spirit and Legacy

One method for evaluating the power of myth is to examine if those in government, news media, or general society determine the narrative is worthy of remembering. Mythic critic Stephen H. Browne explains that myth "is made meaningful [...] in the ensuing time, when natal experience is reconstituted and inscribed into collective consciousness" (92). Myths gain

rhetorical power through their enduring presence in the social lexicon. Yet, the process through which stories become myth, and myth transforms into memory, is incredibly intricate, ideological, and public. Rhetoricians Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles argue it is the communal characteristic of memory that “establishes its political/rhetorical power” (418). Public memories do not just form naturally, but rather, are rhetorically negotiated by the populous and are constantly evolving depending on the needs of society (Zelizer “Reading the Past” 218). In a time when the United States experienced great internal division, caused in part by an upcoming presidential election and war, the mourning and remembrance of Tillman was a nation-wide communal event (Martinez 1). From the day of Tillman’s death, those in the government, military, and news media were overwhelmingly in agreement that his legacy deserved to echo throughout American history. *The Boston Herald* of April 28, 2004, ran the headline: “Don’t Forget Tillman. Hero’s Story Must be Told” (Buckley 1). For many in the American public, Tillman’s death created an incredibly emotional response that continues to linger. One American citizen reflected this point by posting six years after Tillman’s passing: “Time will never diminish Pat’s sacrifice or his memory. A true American patriot and hero!” (Paula). While many in American society advocated the remembrance of Tillman, *how* to remember him, was and continues to be a heavily ideological and political process. Rhetorician Amy Lynn Heyse argues that when studying memory it is imperative that critics ask: “Which individuals or groups have the authority to construct memory for a collective?” (412).

In this final section I briefly outline the evolution and current position of the Tillman death narrative in public memory throughout much of American society. I contend that after his death, Tillman’s meaning became a space of rhetorical contention where some oppositional political groups attempted to “claim” his legacy as embodiment of their ideological superiority.

By mapping the development of many dominant portions of the public memory surrounding Tillman's myth, I demonstrate how Tillman's legacy has potentially shifted from a conservative to more liberal doctrine.

### *Conservative Hero*

It may appear that by marking national unity as an important virtue, the discourse of Tillman's patriotic death was a catalyst for bi-partisanship within American society. While it may be true that the majority of society temporarily looked beyond politics following Tillman's death by focusing on public mourning, those efforts were short lived for many. Moreover, the very process of public remembering is itself inherently political. As memory scholar Zelizer notes, “[t]he collective memory comprises recollections of the past that are determined and shaped by the group. By definition, collective memory thereby presumes activities of sharing, discussion, negotiation, and often, contestation” (“Reading the Past” 214). After Tillman’s death, some political groups invoked his memory as validation of their own ideologies and policies. The Tillman death narrative’s rhetoric was incredibly supportive for Republican leadership at the time of his death. Since Tillman died in service to his country, his sacrifice seemed to tacitly vindicate the national leadership, who at the time were predominantly Republican.<sup>54</sup> Initially, Tillman’s symbolism was embraced by some on the Right as justification for Bush’s foreign policy and conservative ideology. When remarking over the important events of 2004, conservative pundit Ann Coulter wrote:

American hero Pat Tillman won a Silver Star this year. But unlike [John] Kerry, he did not write his own recommendation or live to throw his medals over the White House fence in an anti-war rally [...] Tillman was an American original: virtuous, pure and masculine like only an American male can be [...] He wanted no publicity and granted no interviews about his decision to leave pro football in the prime of his career and join the

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<sup>54</sup> In April, 2004, the Republican Party possessed the Presidency and majorities in both the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.

Army Rangers. Most perplexing to Democrats, he didn't even take a home movie camera to a war zone in order to create fake footage for future political campaigns in which he would constantly palaver about his military service and drag around his "Band of Brothers" for the media." (Coulter 1)

Coulter's rhetoric elevated conservatism by portraying Tillman as an American hero and contrasting his heroism against Democrats in leadership. Moreover, Coulter's evaluation of Tillman highlighted masculinity and military service as key indicators of his worth. The death narrative's discourse characterized Tillman as the ultimate hero of the War on Terror. Thus, for some Tillman's memory of excellence became a rhetorical political argument against the democrats.

Since Tillman became the embodiment of the War on Terror for many Americans, there were indeed some who publicly criticized his service and the U.S.'s foreign policy. However, this criticism was certainly not from institutional forces in the government, military, or mainstream news media. In fact, one of the most publicized rebukes of Tillman's service was from a University of Massachusetts graduate student named Rene Gonzalez, who detailed his criticism in the *Daily Collegian* (McCaslin 1).<sup>55</sup> Gonzalez challenged Tillman's heroic status by referring to him as a "Rambo" figure, who choose service out of "nationalist patriotic fantasies" ("UMass Grad Student: Tillman's Not a Hero" par. 3).<sup>56</sup> Dozens of mainstream newspapers denounced the actions of this one Massachusetts graduate student who spoke out against Tillman's service and the War on Terror. Specifically, some newspapers referenced Gonzalez's rhetoric as evidence that liberals were pleased by the death of Tillman. As the conservative newspaper, The *Washington Times* of May 23, 2004, editorialized:

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<sup>55</sup> Another publicized challenge to the Tillman myth was an editorial cartoon by Ted Rall which called Tillman an "idiot" for serving in the military. This cartoon also drew the ire of many in the news media and general public and was pulled from syndication. In fact, Rall received several death threats after the release of the cartoon. The cartoon and several comments about the controversy can be found on Rall's website at: <http://www.rall.com/2009/09/pat-tillman-revisited.html>.

<sup>56</sup> "Rambo" was a hyper-masculine war movie released in 1982.

The more I try to convince myself liberals truly have Americas best interest at heart, the harder it becomes [...] When football-star-turned-Army Ranger Pat Tillman was killed last April in Afghanistan, liberals hadn't been that excited since the Supreme Court ruled in favor of killing unborn babies on demand. It is hard to explain the irony surrounding the far-left web sites that condemned Tillman as a 'baby killer,' but at least they clarified their stance by celebrating the death of this 'dumb jock' who 'got what he deserved.' This, however wasn't quite as telling as the virtually silent response of the mainstream media to this bile. (Bothwell 1)

Since Gonzalez's article had greatly departed from the dominant public memory of Tillman's death, it was harshly rejected by those in the news media and general public.

For some individuals, the actions of one college graduate student became evidence that Democrats were not interested in protecting America's best interest. In another example, the conservative on-line newspaper *Front Page Magazine* lambasted those on the political Left on May 4, 2004, by stating:

With the body barely cold, the Left has begun demonizing the late Pat Tillman [...] In a depressing turn of events, the American campus is the latest to spit on Tillman's corpse [...] Yet Pat Tillman died to give leftists the right to hate him. That makes his death all the more heroic-and their venom all the more disgusting. (Johnson 1)

This analysis discovered several instances where the mainstream media condemned the Gonzalez's article for slandering the memory of Tillman.<sup>57</sup> As this controversy illustrates, following Tillman's death there was a rhetorical tension in the American public on the proper way to remember his sacrifice. For some individuals Tillman represented an honorable war-hero who died defending American values against terrorism, however, for others Tillman symbolized the unjust foreign policy of the Bush Administration. However, the rhetoric of the death narrative likely had a significant impact in creating the views of those in society who saw Tillman as a heroic American exemplar. The public dissent that existed over Tillman's legacy

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<sup>57</sup> Gonzalez's article was criticized by: *The Patriot Ledger* of April 29, 2004; *The Boson Herald* of April 30, 2004; *The Washington Times* of April 30, 2004; *The San Diego Union-Tribune* of May 1, 2004; *The New York Post* of May 1, 2004; *The USA Today* of May 3, 2004; *The Boston Globe* of May 3, 2004.

was largely sparse and quickly rejected with by those in the U.S. news media and American public.

### *Liberal Shift*

A major turn in the meaning of Tillman's memory began after May 29, 2004, once it became revealed that he was likely killed by friendly-fire. The gallant details of Tillman's final moments as represented by the death narrative were instrumental in his symbolic representation as a mythic hero worthy of remembering. The initial Pentagon corrections in the details of Tillman's death were not overly specific or contradictory to the established narrative. When delivering the official Pentagon response Lt. Gen. Philip Kensinger Jr. stated:

A military investigation by U.S. Central Command into the circumstances of the 22 April death of Corporal Patrick Tillman is complete. While there was no one specific finding of fault, the investigation results indicate that Corporal Tillman *probably died as a result of friendly fire while his unit was engaged in combat with enemy forces*. The results of this investigation in no way diminish the bravery and sacrifice displayed by Corporal Tillman. Corporal Tillman was shot and killed while responding to enemy fire without regard for his own safety. He focused his efforts on the elimination of enemy forces and the protection of his team members. There is an inherent degree of confusion in any firefight, particularly when a unit is ambushed, and especially under difficult light and terrain conditions which produce an environment that increases the likelihood of fratricide. (1)

The military's initial response was not very conclusive and would only report that it was "likely" that Tillman died of friendly fire. Despite acknowledging the possibility of fratricide, the rhetoric of military officials still highlighted key components of the dominant Tillman death narrative. To start, the Pentagon's discourse maintained the battlefield context by stating Tillman died during "combat with enemy forces" after his team was "ambushed" despite the fact that no enemy forces were present (Tillman 214). The Pentagon even went on to elaborate that: "The ambush was conducted by 10 to 12 enemy personnel from multiple locations over approximately one kilometer in very severe and constricted terrain with impaired light

conditions" (Kensinger par. 6). The military's statement immediately reinforced the mythic symbolism of Tillman, regardless of the friendly-fire incident. By arguing that Tillman was still a hero who died in battle defending American freedom, the institutional discourse of the military secured the mythic nature of Tillman's death in public memory.

However, after the military's press release, the details of the original reporting of Tillman's death continued to unravel. It would take several months before the exact details of Tillman's death were verified to the American society. The May 29, 2004, announcement incited a series of investigations that culminated in a U.S. Congressional inquiry by the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform in April 2007.<sup>58</sup> Once friendly-fire was concluded as the cause of Tillman's death, any criticism directed toward the soldier was then redirected toward the Bush Administration. After being told for over a month that Tillman was killed by enemy forces, the American public and news media reacted harshly against the Bush Administration in what many had alleged was evidence of a cover-up to gain support for the War on Terror. On the day of the government's release, the May 29, 2004, *Orlando Sentinel* concluded that those in the government and military had used Tillman to "sell a war [...] If you die by accident that doesn't make your sacrifice any less significant. Just a lot less marketable" (Bianchi 1-2). This article is indicative of numerous news media publications which articulated the accusation of governmental dishonesty. Moreover, many in the American public determined that One citizen exemplified the common public opinion in a letter to the editor published in the June 19, 2005 *New York Daily Record*:

We now see the outright lies that our neocon government will create to achieve their goals and propaganda. The fictitious tales about Pat Tillman and Jessica Lynch, and the

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<sup>58</sup> The results of the investigation were published on July 17, 2008 and can be found at: [http://militarytimes.com/static/projects/pages/071408house\\_tillman\\_lynchreport.pdf](http://militarytimes.com/static/projects/pages/071408house_tillman_lynchreport.pdf)

whole Iraq war based on lies, greed and fake documents. The White House was giving press passes to fake reporters who promoted the neocons' policy and goals. (Fulton 1)

Many American citizens perceived the initial reporting of Tillman and Lynch as indication that the government and military were deliberately modifying reports from the battlefield to manipulate public opinion. The *Philadelphia Tribune* of April 29, 2007, argued that the mistreatment of Tillman's death was evidence of the Bush Administration's "hypocrisy about its love and support for the troops" ("Putting Faces on Pentagon Lies" 1). Some even went so far as to argue that the Bush Administration may have murdered Tillman to keep his growing anti-war beliefs hidden (Raimondo 2). Large portions of the American public and news media accused the Bush Administration of misleading the public about the War on Terror (Altheide 173). With the revelation that Tillman had died from friendly-fire when no enemy forces were present, many opponents of President Bush found new justification for their dissent.

Thus, although the death narrative's discourse was very supportive of war, in light of the charges of governmental manipulation the public memory of Tillman became far more oppositional to war. Consider the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* of April 26, 2007 which contended that the Tillman controversy showed the U.S. government and military were:

Broken, corrupt and deceitful. The young men and women in the ranks are wonderfully brave and dedicated, but they are being used and abused in an effort every bit as wrongheaded as Vietnam [...] There is no light at the end of the Iraq tunnel." ("Why the Tillman Lie is Bigger than it Seems" 1)

The scandal over the reporting of Tillman's death was referenced as an indication that the War on Terror resembled the Vietnam War. According to many in the U.S. news media, soldiers fighting in the War on Terror were victims of the mismanagement of those in government and the military. Tillman's memory was discussed as one example of the dishonest treatment of soldiers at the hands of those in positions in power.

As the public memory of Tillman's death shifted to reflect the presence of friendly fire, one reoccurring theme in the U.S. news media was to criticize those in positions of power while simultaneously defending Tillman's honor and legacy. Although many denounced the actions of the federal government and Pentagon, those in the news media attempted to reassert Tillman's status as an epic hero. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* of March 12, 2006 noted, “[p]erhaps the most disturbing aspect of the story was how reflexively the Pentagon chose dishonesty, and for how little reason. This wasn't a lie told to confuse the enemy or protect the troops or honor Tillman, who doesn't need fakery or flackery to make him a hero” (Carlson 1). Many leftist publications embraced Tillman's story as a tragic indication of the consequences of war. One anti-war internet blog titled, *Ranger Against War: Pat Tillman*, has used the memory of Tillman's death to advocate against militaristic U.S. foreign policy. As the website states: “The fact that Tillman was a great American and a fine man and Ranger is an indisputable fact. But the plaque concludes by saying that Cpl. Tillman died as the result of enemy fire, in an ambush. Which is a load of crap” (“Ranger Against War: Pat Tillman” par. 2-6). Even though Tillman did not actually die in the heroic death that was reported by those in the government, military, those in news media and American public maintained that he was indeed still a hero.

Furthermore, military officials determined that Tillman was still worthy of the Silver Star awarded to him after his death for his “courageous actions on the day he died” (“Department of Defense News Briefing” 4). Protecting the sanctity of the American soldier has been a reoccurring reality in contemporary politics and popular culture. In his examination of the social reaction to the movie *Black Hawk Down*, rhetorician Stephen Klien posits that in our current society “[w]ar is portrayed in a critical light but the protagonists are depicted as heroic” (429). Although there was some condemnation of Tillman found in response to the death narrative, this

analysis was unable to uncover a single public criticism of Tillman after the reports of friendly-fire were made public.

### *The Tillman Memory in 2009 and Beyond*

The year 2009 offered another opportunity to examine the status of the Tillman public memory due to the publication of two books on the subject. The first, *Boots on the Ground by Dusk: My Tribute to Pat Tillman*, was written by Tillman's mother Mary Tillman. And the second, *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman*, was written by acclaimed journalist and author John Krakauer. These releases received substantial news media coverage and *Where Men Win Glory* was named a *New York Times* bestseller. Moreover, both books are significant for the critical examination of memory because as the *New York Times* of September 24, 2009 asserted, these representations acted to "keep this American tragedy very public indeed" (Maslin 2). Thus, the publication of the two manuscripts, and the media reaction following their release, adds further light on the condition of Tillman's public memory. Here, I argue that by emphasizing parts of Tillman's character that were not discussed by those in the government, military, or news media, both books presented prospective memories of Tillman which reflected liberal values. For example, Krakauer's discourse presented Tillman as a military warrior that was also an advocate for gay rights. As Krakauer clarified, "[h]e [Tillman] was an ardent advocate for the rights of homosexuals, for instance, and once demanded of Lyle Setencich, an ASU football coach for whom he had great respect, 'Could you coach gays?' When Setencich answered not only yes he could, but that he already had, Tillman's esteem for the coach grew even higher" (116). Thus, Tillman's acceptance of homosexuality has become a recent addition to his public memory.

In another prominent example of the symbolic disputation of Tillman's memory, each book focused on his lack of religious affiliation. As Mary Tillman noted when discussing the nationally televised funeral preceding: "I remembered thinking that the first three speakers [at Tillman's funeral] had referenced God, yet Pat wasn't religious" (163). Tillman's religious views became a source of considerable controversy when one of his commanding officers Lt. Col. Ralph Kauzlarich was interviewed by *ESPN*'s Mike Fish in June 2006. When asked about the pending investigation, Kauzlarich responded that Tillman's parents were likely unsatisfied with the military findings because of the lack of religious influence in their lives. As Kauzlarich told Fish:

When you die, I mean, there is supposedly a better life, right? Well, if you are an atheist and you don't believe in anything, if you die, what is there to go to? Nothing. You are worm dirt. So for their son to die for nothing, and now he is no more — that is pretty hard to get your head around that. So I don't know how an atheist thinks. I can only imagine that that would be pretty tough. (Fish "An Un-American Tragedy" par. 29)

During the interview, Kauzlarich expressed his opinion that the Tillman family's non-religious practices were one reason for their critical and persistent questioning of the military information on the specific events that culminated in Tillman's death.

The Tillman family has repeatedly expressed its view that Tillman did not believe in god. When eulogizing his brother in the national televised memorial service, Richard Tillman said, "Pat would want me to say this: he's not in heaven, he's fucking dead. Thanks for your thoughts — but he's fucking dead" (Krakauer 99). Of the 150 articles examined, this thesis only discovered one instance where members of the American news media acknowledged Richard Tillman's remarks at the funeral proceeding, or his brother's possible atheism. However, with the publications of Tillman and Krakauer's books, the topic of Tillman's religious beliefs remain contentious to this day. In fact, an entire *Conservapedia* entry, the conservative response to

*Wikipedia*, is dedicated to arguing that Tillman was indeed a believer in god.<sup>59</sup> As the anonymous author contends: “How many atheists do you know who would sacrifice their life for their country? For others? Selflessness is not an atheist quality [...] Atheism had but one conviction, the daily fight to remove God from their own lives and others’ lives. This is not the Pat Tillman America produced” (“Pat Tillman Was Not An Atheist” par. 6-9). This is just one representation of the ongoing public debate over Tillman’s public memory and meaning. The complex and multifaceted descriptions that recently surfaced of Tillman’s character differed greatly from the absolutism of the death narrative’s discourse. Recent interpretations of Tillman as a pro-gay atheist have contrasted the original reports of him as a defender of traditional American values. One website dedicated to the topic of atheism exemplified the dispute between old and new representations of Tillman by writing:

The real Pat Tillman was an atheist who, after getting to the Middle East, perceived the truth and described the invasion of Iraq as ‘so f\*\*\*ing illegal.’ The mythological Pat Tillman was a hero who could be used as a recruitment poster for the neo-conservative attempt to turn the Middle East into a haven for democracy. The real Pat Tillman was inconvenient and his death was a reminder of how poor military decision-making could be. The mythological Pat Tillman could hopefully invigorate the religion-nationalist cause. I much prefer the real Pat Tillman, but unfortunately they killed him. (Cline par. 22)

Thus, some portions of the Tillman public memory seem to have mirrored a movement toward liberal acceptance of ideas such as gay rights, atheism, and opposition to war.<sup>60 61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> There are several internet examples of religious and non-religious groups debating over whether Tillman was a believer or an atheist. For a better understanding of this rhetorical tension I suggest viewing the following websites, which are representative of the ongoing discussion:

[http://www.conservapedia.com/Essay:Pat\\_Tillman\\_was\\_not\\_an\\_atheist](http://www.conservapedia.com/Essay:Pat_Tillman_was_not_an_atheist)

[http://www.futureofthebook.org/mitchellstephens/archives/2006/07/pat\\_tillman\\_non.html](http://www.futureofthebook.org/mitchellstephens/archives/2006/07/pat_tillman_non.html)

<sup>60</sup> It is not my intention to stereotype liberals or conservatives. I acknowledge that it is indeed fact that there are conservatives in favor of gay rights and liberals who support the War on Terror. I merely wish to reflect that while the original death narrative reflected traditional conservative values, many portions of the public memory of Tillman mirror traditional liberal values. I do not wish to type-cast, instead I hope to show how these political forces have played a metaphorical ‘tug of war’ over Tillman’s memory.

<sup>61</sup> A legitimate criticism could be leveled toward my labeling of atheism’s acceptance as a liberal value. Again, this is not meant to offend or stereotype. However, I think it is reasonable to say that liberalism is generally more

Public memory typically involves tensions over what is, and is not, important to remember (Zelizer “Reading the Past” 227). Notwithstanding the changes to the meaning of the death narrative, the current public memory of Tillman still reflects many of the dominant themes presented in the original narrative. For instance, sacrifice and military service continue to be central components of Tillman’s legacy. When summarizing the key points of Tillman’s story the *Washington Post* of September 13, 2009, reported:

By now, the story of Pat Tillman is widely known: how he turned down a lucrative contract in the National Football League to join the U.S. Army’s 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks; how he fought in Iraq and Afghanistan; how he died; and how the cause of his death-friendly fire-was kept from his family and public for weeks in what, depending on your point of view, was either a gross error or judgment or a conspiracy engineered by the U.S. military and the Bush administration. (Exum 1)

Tillman’s career in professional athletics, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and his death, remained key portions of the Tillman myth and memory. Added to the original death narrative was the charge that Tillman was a noble soldier who was mistreated by the Bush Administration’s exploitation of his death.

One pervasive public memory of Tillman was that of a soldier who was betrayed by the government that sent him to war. Hence, Tillman’s memory lead some individuals and organizations to dedicate additional support to those who serve in the U.S. military. *The Pat Tillman Foundation*, an organization formed after his death by family and friends, “was established to carry forward Pat’s legacy of leadership and civic action by supporting future generations of leaders who embody the American tradition of citizen service” (“Making a Difference” 1). The organization offers scholarships and financial support to those in the military. However, this institute exposes how Tillman’s memory continues to be rhetorically negotiated by particular groups in society. In the “About Pat Tillman” section of the website, the

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accepting of atheism than conservatism. Furthermore, the public discourse analyzed in this thesis framed religion as a key difference between the Left and Right’s interpretation of Tillman’s memory.

foundation has posted: “On the evening of April 22, 2004, Pat’s unit was ambushed as it traveled through the rugged, canyon terrain of eastern Afghanistan. His heroic efforts to provide cover for fellow soldiers as they escaped from the canyon led to his tragic death via fratricide” (“About Pat Tillman” par. 12). Although the group references fratricide, they still maintain that Tillman’s group was attacked. Instead of being a simple mistake, this could indicate that the group is more comfortable remembering Tillman’s sacrifice in the presence of enemy forces. When examining the malleability of public memory, Zelizer concludes that “memories help us fabricate, rearrange, or omit details from the past as we thought we knew it” (“Reading the Past” 217). For some collectives in society it appears that the specific details of Tillman’s death remain disputed.

The mythic structure of the Tillman death narrative embodied a version of the Frontier Myth. In the institutional discourse of the government, military, and news media, Afghanistan was presented as a frontier that needed to be tamed for American society to progress. Tillman was framed as a mythic hero who lost his life in defense of the common good. Finally, because the War on Terror had not yet successfully ended, the mythic discourse shifted responsibility to the American public to finish the job. The death narrative’s mythic discourse made a substantial argument to the American people that Tillman was an individual to remember and mimic. Yet, the specifics of the process of remembering Tillman were fluid and ideological. The public memory of Tillman has undergone numerous changes, and is likely to shift further in the future in response to modern day beliefs and cultural imperatives.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The American public may never know conclusively if institutional forces in the government, military, and news media deliberately high-jacked Tillman's death in order to facilitate domestic approval for war, or if his death narrative was simply the result of good intentions, overlapping mistakes, and errors of judgment. Determining the intentionality of the death narrative's authors is not a comfortable position for the rhetorical critic and was not the focus of this thesis. However, it is clear that soldiers on the ground knew incontrovertibly that Tillman lost his life from friendly fire and that those in the government, military, and news media were indeed involved in the dissemination of information indicating otherwise. While the specific aims of the death narrative's purveyors cannot be fully established, this analysis still sheds considerable light on the impacts of their discourse on the American public's conceptualization of the War on Terror.

The narrative analysis of the death narrative's discourse revealed that national sacrifice and violence were highlighted as key cultural values for American society during the time of Tillman's passing in April 2004. Furthermore, the content of the death narrative placed additional significance on nationalism over international cooperation through the omission of relevant information. The rhetoric of the narrative had a considerable impact on bolstering domestic support for war by establishing a sense of guilt with the American public following 9/11, creating a symbolic bridge between Tillman's alleged morality and those in positions of power, and by presenting a simplified version of war. Furthermore, the death narrative was a

reflection of hegemonic masculinity, where the discourse of those in the government, military, and news media centered the white male as an exemplary role model and citizen. The communicative prevalence of hegemonic masculinity substantiated white nationalism and alluded to continued gender separation in the U.S. military and society. The death narrative also illustrated the mounting symbolic interconnection between sport and war in American culture. Finally, the discourse of the narrative modeled the mythic structure of the Frontier Myth, in which, Tillman was presented as a legendary hero who died attempting to tame the frontier of Afghanistan for the safety of the American public. By framing the Middle-East as a frontier that had yet to be conquered, the myth's dramatism transferred responsibility to society to complete the mission. The myth and public memory of Tillman became a space of ideological contention, where his death had diverse meanings for groups within the body politic over time. Currently, it appears that the majority of public memory concerning Tillman has shifted to encapsulate relatively liberal politics and represent the mistreatment of soldiers by those in the government and military.

The controversy surrounding the reporting of Tillman's death remains significant for several reasons. As of the time of this writing, over 5,000 U.S. soldiers have lost their lives fighting in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars ("U.S. and Coalition Casualties" par. 1).<sup>62</sup> Military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have reached their seventh year, and Tillman remains the most high profile casualty of these conflicts to date (Semple and Lehren 1). No other soldier has received nearly as much attention by those in the government, military, news media, or general public (Burgwin 89). Thus, in many ways, Tillman helped give, and continues to give, a "face

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<sup>62</sup> Exact calculations for war dead can be very difficult to determine. This rough estimate comes from CNN.com's tally of U.S. casualties as of February 28, 2010, which can be found at <<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2003/iraq/forces/casualties/index.html>>. These numbers are certainly only a small fraction of the actual number of lives lost in the War on Terror since statistics representing civilian deaths are not included.

and a voice” to U.S. War on Terror (Jenkins 1). Consequently his death narrative, myth, and public memory offer an exceptional perspective into the mechanisms through which society makes sense of war and is possibly motivated to fight. During times of war and tragedy, society is particularly susceptible to persuasion from those in positions of power (Pantii and Sumiala 127). The high level of involvement by institutional forces makes the Tillman case particularly notable. Tillman’s career and life choices helped make his death narrative a rhetorical nexus of masculinity, sport, whiteness, myth, memory, and warfare to name a few. Moreover, Tillman’s pervasiveness and longevity as a national symbol of sacrifice and patriotism offers a rich array of discourse to examine dominant cultural values, paradigms, and assumptions. His death narrative was a window to see the world and a mirror to see ourselves.

A project of this depth is able only to scratch the surface of Tillman’s rhetorical and social significance. That being said, this analysis does offer implications relating to the Tillman death narrative, the field of communication studies, and the health of American democracy. Initially, I focus on the impact of this study on narrative criticism and the creation of narrative texts for rhetorical study. Next, I turn to the implications of my findings concerning the interaction between the government, news media, and American public during times of war. I conclude by discussing the rhetorical significance of death and suggest that rhetorical critics and those in society should be mindful of institutional representations of death.

The first implication of this study concerns an ongoing debate in communication studies revolving around the ability of those in the public to use narrative rationality to judge whether to accept specific stories from those in positions of power. As communication scholar Barbara Warnick critiques the narrative paradigm, “[c]ontrary to Fisher’s observation, the ‘people’ do not always prefer the ‘true and just’” narratives (Warnick 176). Rather, in some cases, societies

seem to embrace narratives that are not based on truth or morality. Warnick evokes the example of Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler to demonstrate that publics have repeatedly fallen victim to “good” stories that hide insidious political and ideological assumptions and consequences. The Tillman case adds to this discussion because the narrative was originally accepted by a major contingent of the American public, only to be largely rejected later when the information of friendly-fire was revealed. In the first month of the death narrative’s dissemination, a vast majority of the American public and news media readily accepted the government and military’s reporting of Tillman’s death with relatively little suspicion and inquiry. Of the 150 articles I studied, from the three weeks after Tillman’s death, none openly questioned the government’s reporting and only a few remarks were leveled against the U.S. military’s involvement in the Middle East. Therefore, it becomes important to consider what may have led to the public’s quick acceptance, as well as the eventual rebuke, of many components of the death narrative.

The harsh refutation of government and military forces by many in the American public following the friendly-fire revelation should be at surprising some level. As military historian Dr. Adrian Lewis explained in his evaluation of the military’s actions following Tillman’s death, often family members and society “prefer to believe that their loved ones were killed in combat against the enemy as opposed to an accident” (“Friendly Fire Death of Pat Tillman Not Accurately Reported to Tillman’s Family” 1). Thus, the death narrative’s patriotic and heroic depiction of Tillman may have been the story that many in the public wanted. This type of possible denial is precisely what concerns Warnick when she claims:

Fisher fails to deal with the question of how we can assure that the public will not choose bad stories based on self-delusion or rationalization. While acknowledging that a coherent narrative with bad values may lead the public astray, Fisher continues to insist that narrative rationality somehow provides a guide for distinguishing the reliability, trustworthiness, and desirability of rhetorical narratives. (181)

Indeed, in this case many in the public seemed to choose a “bad story” by blindly believing the death narrative. Ultimately, we are left to contemplate why the Tillman death narrative was originally accepted by countless American citizens. Perhaps many based their belief in the death narrative on a combination of self-delusion and desire for a heroic story. One damaging implication of this analysis for Fisher’s narrative rationality is that the public did not seem capable of disregarding the government’s stories based on its narrative structure or logic. Instead, I think that it is very likely that many in the American public would not have rejected the death narrative had it not been for Mary Tillman’s unrelenting pressure on government and military officials for answers. Her questioning of military officials, as well as her interaction with members of the U.S. news media, was instrumental in the creation of the Congressional inquiry, in 2007 (Vecsey 1). Without Mary Tillman it is uncertain whether and when the friendly-fire information would have been made public or if enough effort would have been dedicated to determine the exact level of misinformation that was spread throughout the public. This analysis shows that narrative rationality is not a very reliable method for enabling members of society to discriminate between narratives with honest intent and those with ulterior motives. Communication scholarship and narrative criticism continues to struggle to explain why groups and national collectives pick certain narratives over others. Future research could aim to elucidate possible methods and strategies for public examination of narratives, in order for society to make informed decisions about which stories deserve to be accepted from institutional forces.

Another implication for narrative criticism deals with its usefulness as a rhetorical method for the analysis of news media. The study of news media in narrative criticism offers many advantages and drawbacks for the researcher that should be addressed. Initially, news

media can be an incredibly rich source of discourse to implement in the formation of texts for rhetorical analysis. According to rhetorician Michael McGee, critics should combine multiple pieces of discourse into “text construction,” in order to provide for context (“Text, Context, and the Fragmentation” 274). In a similar fashion, this thesis examined 150 pieces of news media to present an overarching death narrative that was representative of the prevalent themes found in the news media’s reporting of Tillman. Although each article was indeed different, in this case, cross referencing the articles for recurring themes helped me to ensure that my findings were valid and supported throughout a far reaching discourse. However, research that relies solely on news media articles runs the risk of being biased and unrepresentative of the views of many in society. Critics should remember when using news media sources in the construction of narrative texts that one editorial does not speak for the masses. One strategy to avoid this problem is to employ a multifaceted approach which rhetorician’s Jim Kuypers, Marilyn Young, and Michael Launer describe as “composite narrative” (307). Composite narrative is the amalgamation of smaller narratives and thematic fragments into one large text for analysis. They argue that such narratives are capable of accessing dominant national values because of the news media’s interconnection with governmental sources, along with their accessibility to the general public (311). In a similar fashion, for this thesis, I combined U.S. news articles with governmental documents, and internet blogging to evaluate the multifarious impacts of the death narrative on the rhetorical meaning of the War on Terror. This study supports a multi-dimensional approach when using news media to study narrative discourse.

The next implication focuses on the communicative interaction among the government, news media, and American public during times of war. Specifically, the analysis reveals the disturbing susceptibility of the American news media in accepting misinformation from

government and military sources. Although it is accurate that those in the government and the military hold vast amounts of responsibility for the dissemination of false information to the public, the American news media also deserves a considerable amount of blame. An informed citizenry is vital for the political health and wellbeing of any democracy.<sup>63</sup> In fact, one primary purpose of the free press is to present members of the public with factual reporting in the hopes that they are capable of making informed political decisions. During times of war it becomes even more imperative that those in the news media offer credible information to society, since the news media acts as a conduit between the government and American public. Journalism scholars Morgen Johansen and Mark Joslyn explain that ideally “media act as a filter, sifting and sorting information in a manner that ensures a reliable and accurate source from which citizens can base judgments about war” (591). In the case of the Tillman death narrative, not only did the American news media fail to protect society against misinformation, but also, it exacerbated the problem by overzealously accepting the reports of the government and military without checking their authenticity. As this study has shown, the news media channeled the death narrative across America.

It was only when the military acknowledged the possibility of friendly-fire that the news media became critical and investigatory about governmental reporting, without acknowledging its own role in the diffusion of false information. There are several structural deficiencies in the current U.S. media that makes it particularly disposed to misinformation from the government and military (Kumar “Media, War, and Propaganda” 52). The constant drive to deliver information as quickly as possible makes it nearly impossible for those in the news media to remain accurate. As Kumar describes: “The constant demand for new information on the 24-

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<sup>63</sup> For an extensive look into the role that information plays in responsible citizenry and democratic achievement see Milner, Henry. *How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*. Hanover, MD: Tufts UP, 2002.

hour news channels, and the credibility associated with official sources, meant that often military claims would be relayed without taking time to check the facts” (“Media, War, and Propaganda” 62). In the past, news was usually delivered to the public a few times a day. However, with the advent of the internet and full-time news stations, the news media is now oriented around the so-called objective delivery of information as instantaneous as possible. In this case, the vast majority of the American press accepted the government and military reports of Tillman’s death on face value, without waiting to authenticate the information’s veracity. Although sparse information was actually given by the government concerning the specifics of Tillman’s death, the news media unfortunately elaborated on the narrative without confirmation. One result of the blind acceptance by the news media was that for over a month the public and Tillman family were misled about the factual circumstances of his passing. The contemporary failures and shortcomings of the U.S. media during the War on Terror have been well documented.<sup>64</sup> This thesis adds to the existing literature by illustrating the quickness and breadth through which faulty information from the government and military was spread to the U.S. populous by institutional forces in the news media.

It took only a handful of government and military press releases to help facilitate a news media frenzy after Tillman’s death. There remains doubt whether the government and military deliberately misled the American public. However, what this analysis does show is that if those in positions of power were interested in public manipulation and war propaganda, the American news media seems to offer few obstacles. Future scholarship might continue to focus on the current propensity of the American news media to report inaccurate information and its impact

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<sup>64</sup> Numerous books have been dedicated to the subject of the news media’s role in a post 9/11 world, and in the lead up to the Iraq War. Two excellent examples are: Dodge, David and Danny Schechter. *The War in Iraq and Why the Media Failed Us*. Westport: Praeger Publisher, 2006; along with Dimaggio, Anthony R. *Mass Media, Mass Propaganda: Examining American News in the ‘War on Terror’*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008.

on the American public. Highlighting the structural weaknesses of the current news media responsible for the spread of misinformation is likely the best chance for reform and improved health of American democracy.

The final implication of this analysis centers on the rhetorical significance of death in influencing the American public's conceptualization of conflict during times of war. As noted above, Tillman has been labeled as the "face and voice" of the War on Terror. The important point to realize is that the face and voice of Tillman presented to American society was not, and could not have been, his own. In death, Tillman could neither enact his voice nor express his own unique opinions. Rather, after Tillman lost his life, his agency was replaced by voices of *living forces* in the government, military, news media, and public. It was there that he ceased to be a person and then ascended as a rhetorical symbol with a multifaceted and ever-changing meaning. Some rhetorical research has focused on the ways that speakers and groups increase ethos by symbolically connecting with the dead. For example, in their study of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo's protests against the Argentina government's dictatorial rule, communication scholars Karen Foss and Kathy Domenici illustrate the ways that groups mobilize to resist government oppression by making death and violence public (237). The mothers attempted to oppose the government by creating a symbolic connection to their lost loved ones who were silenced by imprisonment and death. Indeed, one reason that the death narrative was so emotionally powerful for many in the American public was because Tillman had lost his life. What is significant from a critical perspective is the way that his death was communicatively packaged and framed, along with the possible impacts such dynamics may had for domestic audiences. The manner in which Tillman's death was discussed in the narrative's discourse echoed deeply with ideology, national values, and cultural norms. In my view the rhetorical

critic and the U.S. citizen should be suspicious of *speakers for the dead*, or at least open to the traces of alternative readings of these agents' voices.<sup>65</sup> The reporting of death should not be viewed as static or apolitical. Instead, death narratives are symbolic embodiments of the dead for specific political, societal, and rhetorical purposes.<sup>66</sup> Scholars may continue to ask: Who speaks for the dead and in what capacity? What underlying ideological forces are present during the framing of death? And what cultural norms and practices are mirrored in the reporting of those who lose their life?

The framing of death is particularly noteworthy during times of war. In conflict, there might not be any symbolic or rhetorical force stronger than death. Death is what creates the justification for war and the reason to keep fighting. And paradoxically, death is how we often measure whether we have won. If Kumar is indeed correct that images of war dead have the power to turn Americans away from war, then certain representations of war dead likely move society toward war by tapping into rampant societal values and national imperatives ("Media, War, and Propaganda" 50). Had Tillman survived the events of April 22, 2004, the public understanding of the War on Terror might have been different since institutional forces in the government, military, and news media would have been less able to speak on his behalf. However, because Tillman was no longer available to offer resistance, I believe that it is probable that speakers for his death were able to cipher his public appeal to increase their own ethos and forward specific political objectives with little resistance.

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<sup>65</sup> "Speaker for the Dead" is a term that was popularized by science fiction writer Orson Scott Card in his classic *Ender's Game* series. It refers to those responsible for eulogizing at funerals and giving final thoughts and future recommendations on behalf of those who have passed away.

<sup>66</sup> In the act of praising or demonizing the dead, death narratives can be described as a form of epideictic rhetoric. For more discussion on the historical foundations of narrative and eulogy in epideictic rhetoric see Takis Poulako's "Isocrates's Use of Narrative in the *Evagoras*: Epideictic Rhetoric and Moral Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 317-328.

Tillman may have been the most public example of this phenomenon to date, but he is not its only representative. For example, in June, 2006, the U.S. military reported that three Guantanamo Bay inmates suspected of terrorist involvement had committed suicide in their cells. When describing their actions Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of the Guantanamo Joint Task Force, argued: “They are smart. They are creative. They are committed. They have no regard for human life, neither ours nor their own [...] I believe this was not an act of desperation, but rather an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us” (Starr par. 22). When speaking for the dead, the military maintained that the prisoners had purposefully killed themselves to undermine the U.S.’s resolve in the War on Terror. Further, Harris’ rhetoric framed their deaths as evidence of the prisoners’ alleged hatred of America. Although the prisoners had lost their lives, they were not discussed as victims, but instead their decision to kill themselves was presented as a specific type of symbolic attack. This representation of death by military forces is even more significant because it was most likely inaccurate. Indeed, *Harper’s Magazine* on January 18, 2010, broke a story which asserted that the individuals who died in Guantanamo did not commit suicide, but instead, probably lost their lives from complications occurring during the interrogation technique known as waterboarding (Horton par. 23). Nearly four years after the initial military reports, soldier testimony and official documentation have surfaced which point to the possibility of a government cover-up to keep the truth about these prisoners’ deaths hidden. Indeed, the Guantanamo prisoners’ suicide case and the Tillman death narrative are quite different. However, the representations of the prisoners by those in the military does have disturbing parallels to the Tillman incident, since both official death narratives were incorrect and immediately accepted by the majority of those in the news media and American public.

Both instances validate the need for rhetorical critics to focus on the public dynamics of death during times of war.

In conclusion, the Tillman death narrative is rich in rhetorical significance and deserves more scholarly attention. For example, while this study centered primarily on U.S. news media, additional scholarship could give further attention to on-line sources such as blogs and websites in order to more thoroughly access public opinion and memory of Tillman. Furthermore, it would also be useful to compare U.S. representations of Tillman to those in the international community. It is likely that international news sources had a very different interpretation of Tillman's significance for the War on Terror.

Although it has been nearly six years since his death, the Tillman story continues to influence the American populous and to educate us on the unfavorable nature of war. With a new documentary on Tillman's life slated for a 2010 release, it is uncertain what is next for his narrative or legacy. However, what is certain is that Tillman's life and death had a greater impact on the American public and the War on Terror than he would likely have anticipated-and perhaps would have wanted.

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