Review: Film review: The Tillman Story
Director: Amir Bar-Lev, 2010. 95 min

Daniel Lieberfeld

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Educators can find in *The Tillman Story* a richly nuanced case study of American television’s propensity to propagate nationalistic mythology about war. Amir Bar-Lev’s documentary actually tells several stories: one is the story of Pat Tillman – the charismatic professional football player who left a multi-million-dollar contract and, despite his desire for anonymity, became the military’s most famous enlisted soldier. Originally deployed to Iraq and disillusioned by what he saw there, Tillman nevertheless re-enlisted. He was sent to Afghanistan and served as a compassionate mentor and team leader before being fatally shot by members of his own unit in what was probably a case of trigger-happy negligence.

To the extent that the public knows Tillman’s story, the common understanding is that it revolved around Tillman’s patriotic decision to enlist after 9/11 and the military’s initial claim that he died an heroic combat death, having saved fellow soldiers’ lives, thereby earning the Silver Star for valor in the face of the enemy. The Tillman narrative then took a different turn: the Army admitted, after an investigation, that Tillman actually died from ‘friendly fire’ during an enemy ambush, calling him a tragic, but still heroic, casualty of the fog of war. Although the official claim that 9/11 motivated Tillman’s enlistment also turns out to be false, the film’s revisionism is primarily directed at the latter part of the official narrative. This shows that no evidence was found for an ambush or the involvement of enemy forces, that a military cover-up began within minutes of Tillman’s death, and that army ‘brass’ and Bush administration officials had reason to know that the ‘fog of war’ story was false even as they propounded it.

At another level, *The Tillman Story* concerns Pat’s estimable family, particularly his mother, Dannie, who raised Tillman to be unafraid and to speak the truth, and who for years persevered in the face of official obfuscation and denials to uncover how he died. A restrained and powerful interview subject who is generally sympathetic toward the military, Dannie recalls: ‘You don’t want to think the worst of the people you’re dealing with. You want to believe they’re telling the truth, yet you’re getting this terrible sense you’re being lied to.’ Her efforts culminated in Congressional hearings over higher-level accountability for the cover-up.

At a third level, Bar-Lev’s film provides a case study of how television news sanitizes and sanctifies war and soldiering. It illustrates television’s disinterest either in war’s complexities or the realities of death, and its attraction to uplifting stories confected from good and bad guys, heroism, sacrifice, and valor. Tillman understood the possibility that, if he died, his death would be used as a public-relations stunt and, to avoid this, left instructions that he should not receive a military funeral. However, as *The Tillman Story* vividly conveys, public officials turned Pat’s death into a patriotic spectacle and an advertisement for two elective wars. Archival footage of Tillman’s memorial services and the many militarized public celebrations of his life show how the family’s grief was nationalized against their wishes, and how this complicated their loss.
Of the inanities intoned by politicians and media commentators, Tillman’s wife notes: ‘They would take parts of who he was and magnify those to suit their purposes.’ By uncritically broadcasting these distortions, television allowed itself to get Tillman’s story consistently wrong.

The film deploys extensive commentary from Stan Goff, a former West Point instructor and analyst of military culture who helped the Tillman family. Some of Goff’s insights concern the links between the military and masculinity and how Pat’s death was partly attributable to a culture that produces 19-year-old males whose avidity for combat ‘action’ is based on the expectation that it will make them men.

The film also usefully links the Tillman case with that of Jessica Lynch, a US soldier ‘rescued’ after taking a heroic stand against hostile forces in Iraq. As with Tillman, the military’s narrative about Lynch was a deliberate fabrication: with the willing participation of TV reporters, it staged a dramatic rescue of Lynch, who had neither fought the enemy nor been abducted. Coincidentally, Tillman was assigned a peripheral role in Lynch’s made-for-TV rescue, but was dispirited by its blatant public-relations purposes.

Footage from the Congressional hearings resulting from the painstaking efforts of Tillman’s family to expose a cover-up gives viewers an indelible picture of evasive testimony by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and several generals in charge of America’s wars, and the feebleness of Congress’s oversight.

At a profound level, the film asks viewers to reflect on the difference between experiencing life in the messy here-and-now and clinging to comforting abstractions that deny and distort reality. In Dannie Tillman’s words: ‘By putting this heroic, saintly quality to [Pat] you’re taking away the struggle of being a human being.’ As TS Eliot (2001[1943]) observes: ‘Humankind cannot bear very much reality.’ The Tillman Story helps us understand that the term ‘tragedy’ often stems from national leaders and media institutions that self-servingly accept, or willingly exploit, this human frailty, instead of working to overcome it.

Reference