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The Case of the Hero, Martyr, Victim, and Idiot Pat Tillman

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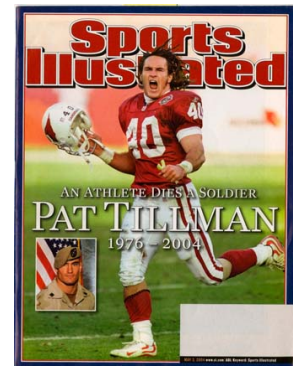


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The Case of Hero, Martyr, Victim, and Idiot Pat Tillman

Summary and Rationale for Assignment

One of the most important dimensions of teaching students about the Nexus of Sports, Media, and the Military is helping them to understand it as a discursive phenomenon. The connections within this nexus are maintained through metaphors, descriptions, and overt comparisons that perpetuate beliefs such as “athletes are warriors” or “stadiums are battlefields.” Because of how we discuss sport, these connections seem natural. So, one of the best ways to examine them is to identify moments or people around which tensions exposed how these discursive links are put together. One such instance was the evolution of Pat Tillman as a characterization of an athlete/warrior.



For those who the name Pat Tillman does not ring a bell, many simply remember him as the athlete who left his professional football career to join the Army following 9/11. In the years since, Pat Tillman has become a complicated character in US politics in large part due to the controversies surrounding his friendly-fire death while fighting in Afghanistan.

I have taught this topic in courses such as Rhetoric and Popular Culture or Gender Communication, but I also have activities for courses specifically pertaining to Nationalism, Controversy, and Sport. There are a variety of contexts in which this topic can be explored in order to help facilitate a better understanding of the relationships between media, sports, and the military. For example, one approach explores the historically rooted traditions of the intersection between athletes and soldiers. David Zirin wrote extensively about this issue and looked specifically at how Tillman plays a role in it in his book [*A People's History of Sports in the United States*](#). Another approach is to examine how Pat Tillman became a symbol of a virtuous, almost unquestionable, masculinity through both his pursuits in the NFL and his willingness to defend his nation. For this, I might lead students to when Jim Rome exclaimed in his eulogy, “Pat is the man I want to be. Pat is the man we all want to be. Pat’s the man we should all aspire to be,” and took for granted that being a man is both something that we should all aspire to and something that was easily observed in Tillman’s actions. In each instance, the goal is to better understand the discursive practices that shape our understandings of the relationship between athletes and soldiers as well as sports and war.

The particular lesson I have chosen to detail here is an exploration of how the life and death of Pat Tillman became a means for examining the nature of heroism. Teaching this lesson allows students to both explore comparisons between what it means to be an athlete-hero and a soldier-hero as well as how the concept of heroism is employed in mediated public discourse. Why Pat Tillman was a hero became a point of contention following his death. To spur our classroom discussion, I present students with a variety of positions on what Tillman’s life and death meant.

Many, such as [John McCain](#) chose to make clear that “Many American families have suffered the same terrible sacrifice that the Tillman family now suffers. The courage and patriotism their loved ones exemplified is as fine and compelling as Pat’s, and their loss should grieve us just as much.” Others, such as [Mike Bianchi](#) of the *Orlando Sentinel* marveled at how “Pat Tillman sacrificed the American Dream to Defend It.” University of Massachusetts graduate student Rene Gonzalez was [publicly vilified](#) and [forced to apologize](#) after he wrote in the *Daily Collegian* that Tillman “[got what was coming to him](#).” Later, Pearl Jam front-man Eddie Vedder penned the politically charged hit-single [World Wide Suicide](#) inspired by Tillman and the cover-up of his death. These are just a few of the ways that Pat Tillman was discussed, but they can provide a basis for a productive discussion about what it means to be a hero and how our understandings of what it means get mediated. The assignments for this lesson are largely centered on the readings that I have detailed below, but I also encourage students to “Google” Pat Tillman and look at some of the ways he is characterized and the people who are doing the characterizing. When they arrive in class, my goal is to get them to begin to examine their own understandings of heroism using the discussion prompts also outlined below.

Discussion Prompts

These discussion prompts are based on previous directions that discussions have gone when I have taught this material in different classes. Of course, not all classroom discussions will cover all of this terrain, but as the discussion develops these themes will help direct the discussion back to the discursive interconnections between heroism, media, soldiers, and athletes.

- Was Pat Tillman a hero? Why or why not?
 - If yes, was it what he gave up?
 - If yes, was it his willingness to serve?
 - If no, was he ever? Does the legacy of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan change how we remember him?
 - Do you think Pat Tillman was different from other soldiers?
 - Why do you think the circumstances leading to Tillman’s death were covered up?
 - What role have media played in understanding Pat Tillman as a hero?
 - Do you think the different ways he was characterized or the lies about how he died change his status as a hero? Or why he is a hero?
- Can athletes be heroes? Why or why not?
 - If yes, what makes their actions heroic?
 - If no, what distinguishes them from true heroes?
 - What about athletes that served in the military? Ted Williams?
- Are all soldiers heroes? Why or why not?
 - Were Vietnam Veterans heroes?
 - Are they now?
 - What changed?
 - What role have modern films played in how we remember the Vietnam War?
 - John Kerry (swift boat)?
- Why do we pay more attention to athletes than soldiers?
 - Does fame play a role in defining a hero?

- What qualities make someone a hero?
 - Can those qualities change?
- What can calling someone a hero teach us?

Undergraduate Readings

Required

- Altheide, D. L. (2006). Chapter 9: Constructing Pat Tillman. In *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*. Oxford: AltaMira Press.
- Butterworth, M. (2008). Fox sports, Super Bowl XLII, and the affirmation of American civil religion. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 32(3), 318-323. doi: 10.1177/0193723508319715
- Herbig, A. W. (2011). Discursive characterization as embodiment and critique: The divergent rhetorical trajectories of Pat Tillman as an American hero. In J. A. Edwards & D. Weiss (Eds.). *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (pp. 132-152). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Supplemental

- Adams, J. R. (2008). *Male Armor: The Soldier-Hero in Contemporary American Culture*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Baty, S. P. (1995). *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Drucker, S. J. (1994). The mediated sports hero. In S. J. Drucker & R. S. Cathcart (Eds.). *American Heroes in a Media Age* (pp. 82-93). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Grano, D. A. (2009). Muhammad Ali versus the “modern athlete”: On voice in mediated sports culture. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26(3), 191-211. doi: 10.1080/15295030903015088
- Lunt, D. J. (2009). The heroic athlete in ancient Greece. *Journal of Sport History*, 36(3), 375-392. Retrieved from <http://www.la84foundation.org/SportsLibrary/JSH/JSH2009/JSH3603/jsh3603i.pdf>
- Parry-Giles, T. (1996). Character, the constitution, and the ideological embodiment of “civil rights” in the nomination of Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 82(4), 364-382. doi: 10.1080/00335639609384163
- Stempel, C. (2006). Televised sports, masculinist moral capital, and support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 30(1): 79–106. doi: 10.1177/0193723505282472

Graduate Readings

Required

- Altheide, D. L. (2006). Chapter 9: Constructing Pat Tillman. In *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*. Oxford: AltaMira Press.
- Butterworth, M. (2008). Fox sports, Super Bowl XLII, and the affirmation of American civil religion. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 32(3), 318-323. doi: 10.1177/0193723508319715

- Drucker, S. J. (1994). The mediated sports hero. In S. J. Drucker & R. S. Cathcart (Eds.). *American Heroes in a Media Age* (pp. 82-93). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Grano, D. A. (2009). Muhammad Ali versus the “modern athlete”: On voice in mediated sports culture. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26(3), 191-211. doi: 10.1080/15295030903015088
- Herbig, A. W. (2011). Discursive characterization as embodiment and critique: The divergent rhetorical trajectories of Pat Tillman as an American hero. In J. A. Edwards & D. Weiss (Eds.). *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (pp. 132-152). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
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Reactions to the Assignment

Typically, students find this lesson both frustrating and rewarding. They have an impulse to define the essential qualities to heroism; and struggle with how heroism can shift and change based on the cultural priorities that come to the surface when the notion of heroism is invoked.

Notes on Contributor

Dr. Art Herbig is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Department at Indiana University – Purdue University, Fort Wayne. His research explores topics pertaining to controversy, gender, rhetorical characterization, memory, and ideology using methodological approaches spanning from critical rhetoric to documentary filmmaking. This particular lesson has been adapted from his dissertation entitled *The Textualization of Pat Tillman: Understanding the Relationships between Person, Discourse, and Ideology*. Dr. Herbig can be reached via email at herbiga@ipfw.edu.