

COMMENTARY BY ROSS GRESHAM

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## The Memory Hole is Us

*Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman*

By Jon Krakauer

Doubleday, 2009

This book takes off halfway through, Chapter 22, when Pvt. Jessica Lynch's army convoy blunders into the Iraqi town of Nasiriyah. Eight days later, one of the thousand soldiers put on alert to participate in Pvt. Lynch's rescue is Pvt. Pat Tillman.

Jessica Lynch. Pat Tillman. To those of us who watch our wars on the news, these may be the only enlisted soldiers we know by name—which is a central subject here, what we know and what we don't.

In *Where Men Win Glory*, Jon Krakauer, accomplished writer of *Into Thin Air* and *Into the Wild*, recounts Tillman's life and death, the bare facts of which are so stirring that most of the college freshman I teach can still recite them. Inspired by 9/11, Tillman gave up his career as a professional football player—a job most American boys fantasize about—to enlist in the US Army. Two years later, in Afghanistan, he was shot to death by another Ranger when half his divided platoon stumbled upon the other half.

Of course, this is all most of us know. Krakauer fills in the details, and doing so takes the tale from tragic to sickening. When he's finished, the nobility of Tillman's choice is still there, burnished by what we learn of Tillman's thoughtful character.

But it also becomes more and more clear that Tillman was wrong, even silly. He left the NFL because wanted to give to something greater than himself, but in the end nothing was: not the Army, and certainly not his country—neither the people running it nor us, the American public, who care little for what actually happens in our name but who go stern and teary over fairy tales of heroism. No one and nothing in the book lives up to the nobility of Tillman's act; no one comes close.

*Where Men Win Glory* falls into sections, and the weakest section is first. After a gripping prologue, the first 18 chapters follow Pat Tillman's young life while providing, in parallel, the happenings in Afghanistan. Tillman is excelling in sports, the Taliban are rising to power.

Tillman is an interesting young man, a free thinker and the sort of athlete who surprises coaches at every level by achieving more than his natural gifts suggest that he might. He makes varsity as a skinny sophomore. No one thinks he can play high-level college football, but he stars in the Rose Bowl. No one thinks he can make the pros, but by the time he quits to join the Army, some sportswriters have him down as the best strong safety in the NFL.

Grit and determination trumping stop-watch speed—it's inspiring stuff. But it's also a fairly common trope of sports writing (the white guy who tries hard) and Krakauer finds more in Tillman than he manages to convince me of. He begins the section with a passage from Susan Neiman's *Moral Clarity*, about "the life force or spark thought close to divine," and generally he implies that with Tillman's death we lose one of the best minds of our generation. Why load such weight on Tillman's shoulders? We see Tillman make kid mistakes. He hurts a harmless boy in a parking-lot scuffle. His journals of drinking and louting his way around Paris are no more edifying than one would expect. One semester at Arizona State, we learn, Tillman gets his grades up from 3.5 to a 4.0. Yes?

It's a small enough problem, perhaps exaggerated by this parallel history of Afghanistan, with the implied sense of a convergence of the twain, two great forces destined for collision, instead of one poor idealist tripping toward the feed chute of implacable machines: geopolitics, the US Army, and the Taliban's medieval horror show. Set against these, the admirable drive that's fueled Tillman's sports career will prove to be less than nothing, a sick joke.

The Afghanistan material is difficult to read for its own reasons. It's ugly from start to finish. President Carter waxes sanctimonious about the Soviets invading Afghanistan. But it turns out that he's faking. He has baited them in, sending aid to the mujahideen in hopes the Soviets will respond and become bogged down as

America had been in Vietnam. The plan works, a great success, but in the process the United States sows the seeds of all that's to come. Afghanistan has burgeoning pockets of culture that we would recognize and admire—rights for women, arts, civil society, etc. The United States throws its weight behind the forces who would stamp these out, dragging the country back to warlords and their medieval tribes. According to Krakauer, George Bush the elder has a chance to stop this, but doesn't—why would he? The United States has its eye on the Soviets. Chaos in Afghanistan is what we're after.

By comparison, the Taliban's rise reads like a hero movie. They come together to stop banditry, and one of their first triumphs is to punish two warlords who are quarreling over which of them gets to rape a child. The Taliban's rigid sense of order is understandably appealing amidst the chaos we and the Soviets caused with our proxy war. Yet soon the Taliban are able to indulge in their own primitive brutality (with which we are more familiar) and history of the place rolls on, unremittingly bleak. Al Qaeda arrives, nursed into being by a combination of US fumbles. They set their sights on us. We ignore their threats and initial strikes until finally President Clinton impotently fires cruise missiles at a training camp, harming few. Some of the missiles fail to detonate, and Osama Bin Laden reportedly sells them to China for some badly-needed cash.

It's almost unreadably painful, and the pain gets worse the second half of the book. The short-sighted self-interest and mendacity roll on when the new President Bush engages that terrible, reeling country—country?—that chaos of people terrorized by bandit lords and zealots. The only difference will be the magnitude.

As a sort of interlude, chapters 18-21 cover Tillman's early days in the army. Not surprisingly, Tillman is disappointed by what he finds. There's silly bullying, and a system that favors time-served over ability. Instead of idealists, most of his fellow recruits are immature kids who joined because they couldn't get jobs elsewhere. With prescience Tillman writes in his journal, "One thing I find myself despising is the sight of all these guns in the hands of children. Of course we all understand the necessity of defense.... It doesn't dismiss the fact that a young man I would not trust with my canteen is walking about armed...."

Not that one should ever get the impression that Tillman is a whiner. He's just genuinely surprised. At the same time he's constantly hopeful that he'll find more professional class of soldier, and he admires them when he does.

At chapter 22 the book begins to move with more expertise. Krakauer explains just how the rescue of Jessica Lynch was a piece of choreographed propaganda. The real war in Iraq was ugly—maybe necessarily ugly, with ubiquitous miscommunication and soldiers simultaneously tired and wired. There were battles where nearly all the American casualties were caused by our own warplanes, strafing pass after pass. Ample numbers of Iraqis were already demonstrating that, far from greeting us “with sweets and flowers,” they would be pleased to see Americans dead. To distract from this disturbing reality, the Bush team invents the tale of Jessica Lynch, who goes down fighting but is captured and tortured, then plucked from the jaws of death by our brave commandos.

Lynch is seriously hurt when her vehicle crashes, but she doesn't fight and she isn't tortured. The staff of the Iraqi hospital to which she is taken gives her two pints of their own blood, and her doctor attempts to return her to the Americans, who fire on the approaching ambulance. No doubt the soldiers who retrieve her from the hospital are brave, but the situation doesn't require it. They meet no real resistance. During these days of the war, there are other American POWs held by the enemy, and no special effort is made to rescue them. The Bush team seems to choose Lynch because she is young and pretty, with the same logic that causes television networks to report the abduction of blonde children as national news.

Some evidence suggests that Lynch's rescue is delayed 24 hours so that a camera crew can be rushed to the site. As Tillman waits to participate in the operation, he and his mates are puzzled by the massive assembly of resources. He writes in his journal: “...I do believe this to be a big Public Relations stunt.”

In *Where Men Win Glory*, all politicians live in a world of perception rather than truth, and the military officers who help compose these pictures are inevitably soiled by the contact. At some point following orders becomes indistinguishable from collusion. Probably, and most charitably, these politicians and military officials truly believe that their war should be fought, and they view the civilian public as unable to process bad news maturely. Instead we (the public) would just be disturbed by what we saw and heard, vaguely and uncomprehendingly.

This argument goes that the military has to show the public a good war or they won't support it, and then worse things will happen. They might have to shut the whole thing down. If the public is manipulated with fictions, a larger, greater truth will stand.

And at some level, *Where Men Win Glory* supports at least the first part of this case: the American public can't understand anything.

In one course this semester I teach about forty young men and women. These are Air Force Academy cadets, fairly well-versed in war news. About ten of them knew of Jessica Lynch. Who was she? A soldier taken prisoner in the war, rescued by special operations forces. Only one of my students ventured a few of the more cynical facts: an Iraqi lawyer told us about her, would walk three miles to our checkpoint to tell us....

What most knew was the old story, primarily—the first story, the fake one. Yet Krakauer isn't the first to expose this colossal hoax. What lasts, what sticks in our heads, disturbingly, is the *better* story. "Jessica Lynch, The Truth," is not as appealing as "Jessica Lynch, The Lie." Let's face it, "Jessica Lynch, The Truth" is a non-story. It happens all the time and we don't hear about it.

Next time you're in front of twenty people, ask them what they know about Lynch. Then ask about Pat Tillman.

Throughout *Where Men Win Glory* I'm reminded of George Orwell, another gifted young man who, inspired by a higher cause, volunteered for infantry combat. Toward the end of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* he loses his famous cool a few times. While he and his unit have been serving in the front lines, a political shift back in Barcelona has caused his militia organization to be pronounced politically unsound. Orwell and his fellows, who have given up promising lives in other countries, and who have served bravely in combat, are quietly rounded up by the authorities. In one pathetic scene, Orwell has to beg a police underling for a document which he hopes will free his commander. He has no voice left, having been shot through the throat by a Fascist sniper.

In "Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War," Orwell writes,

...Early in life I have noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. I saw troops who had fought bravely denounced as cowards and traitors, and others who had never seen a shot fired hailed as heroes of imaginary victories; and I saw newspapers in London retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that had never happened. I saw, in fact, history being written not in

terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various 'party lines.'

Later, he goes on:

This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the chances are that those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history.

If you haven't picked up *Homage to Catalonia* in a while, it's easy to forget that sections of it are almost unreadably dense. Orwell worries that the facts of the political turmoil in Barcelona will go forever misreported, so he sets down his own eye-witness account in great detail. These late chapters slog on and on, with the various factions carefully distinguished, who shot first, who ordered what.... More than any other writer I know, Orwell doesn't want to lie. He carefully distinguishes between what he sees, what he surmises, what he heard and how likely he thinks this is to be true. As a result we have no over-arching narrative on which to hang all of this information. Our eyes begin to glaze. 'Are the good guys winning? Wait, I thought they were the villains...'

Krakauer's book is similarly loaded with information. There's the history of Afghanistan. The vote count in the 2000 election. Bits from political speeches. There is a map (sensible) of the ambush terrain and a map (why?) of California. Krakauer gives an opening "Dramatis Personae" of 48 names from Tillman's platoon and their Afghan allies, along with their position in various vehicles ("Private First Class Kyle Jones, left waist seat"). In a blocked-off section he names the fourteen members of Tillman's chain of command, right up to President Bush, and their assistants.

Krakauer isn't Orwell, and some of this information feels simultaneously too fast and too slow. Instead of a neutral history of Afghanistan, we're given the bits that support a particular narrative. Krakauer is disgusted by what he's found. His jog through the history will stop at the low points. It's convincingly done, useful to an amateur like me, but I can't trust it as the final word, and I doubt it would impress a historian.

At other times, though, as with these exhaustive lists, or with the exhaustive who-saw-what of Tillman's death, there is an echo of Orwell's concern. These things have been misrepresented so many times that finally we need to go through it point

by point, slowly. 'I know,' he seems to be saying, 'I know the army admits that they buried their damning first report on the Tillman incident. But this fact needs to be set down once more, clearly and unambiguously, using everyone's full name.'

And if you and I get bored of the nuts and bolts, and relax instead on platitudes about Tillman's bravery, or the bravery of soldiers in general, or about honoring sacrifice...if the real story is available and we hold onto the fake one because it's simpler and nicer, then can we really blame Tillman's senior commanders or the Office of Strategic Influence?

The protagonist in Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith, works for the Ministry of Truth, rewriting history so that it doesn't undermine the claims of the government, and then destroying the old, problematic documents by sticking them down the "memory hole." At one point he's trying to erase a newly-declared traitor from the newspapers and must fill the vacant space, so he invents a hero soldier, one Comrade Ogilvy. Ogilvy lives a pure life, at age eleven denouncing his uncle to the Thought Police, and at nineteen designing a new hand grenade. He dies at twenty-three, deliberately sinking himself in the Indian Ocean in order to prevent secret dispatches from falling into enemy hands.

"Winston debated with himself whether to award Comrade Ogilvy the Order of Conspicuous Merit; in the end he decided against it because of the unnecessary cross-references that it would entail."

After Tillman's death, the army fast-tracks him for a Silver Star, though everyone involved knows that he's simply been the victim of a friendly-fire accident. This is as Tillman himself predicted. After joining the army he had refused all requests for interviews. He didn't want special celebration of himself and his choice, and he didn't want to become Comrade Ogilvy. One of his pals in Iraq tells us, "He was afraid that if something were to happen to him, Bush's people would, like, make a big deal out of his death and parade him through the streets. And those were his exact words: 'I don't want them to parade me through the streets.'"

He didn't want it, but once he was dead there was nothing he could do.

Until Tillman was killed I knew his story in the peripheral-vision way I "know" many things—internet flashes that appear beside my email, or headlines as I walk past the newspaper box. After he died I learned more. I read a long, moving article about him in *Sports Illustrated*, "Code of Honor."

The other day I looked it up to re-read. At the end I cried again, it's so poignant. The first scene is Tillman in Afghanistan, amongst mountains that "crawled with

al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters traveling in packs of four or five dozen.” (Crawling in packs?) Tillman and his platoon are hot on the trail of some “big dogs”: Mohammed Omar, al-Zawahiri, “or the biggest one of all, Osama bin Laden.” “Dusk fell. The shadows twitched with treachery.”

A tribesman rode with them, a Taliban sympathizer. He was a plant who had offered to take the Rangers to a hidden enemy arms dump. Instead he was leading them into a trap. That’s what Taliban sources would report later, after the air ripped just outside of Spera at half past seven and everything went to hell.

The Rangers scrambled out of their vehicles as they came under ambush and charged the militants on foot. Suddenly Pat was down, Pat was dying. Two other U.S. soldiers were wounded, and a coalition Afghani fighter was killed in a firefight that lasted 15 or 20 minutes before the jihadists melted away. That’s what the American military says.

If only one thing here were true. Instead, Tillman died the way most soldiers die. His platoon was following orders that now, when we have the luxury to consider them coolly, seem arbitrary and silly. No hunt for Osama. No treachery. No fight. Some Afghans shot at Rangers earlier, but they ran away long before any killing happened. All the casualties were from Americans shooting at each other. A few of the men who were involved in this earlier ambush were captured later. They weren’t “jihadists” but local boys hired for the occasion, and if the evening had turned out differently and the Americans had slaughtered them to the man, it’s hard to see how the US cause would have been advanced.

What did happen was that an underslept, dim-witted American soldier, jittery from all the shooting, saw Tillman waving his empty arms, shouting “I’m Pat Fucking Tillman!” and put three bullets in his head.

Which account will stick, if I ask my students in twenty years? I suppose that’s clear. Another *Sports Illustrated* writer, Peter King, returned for a USO tour of Afghanistan and mentioned, disturbingly, that the troops were tired of questions about Tillman. It’s another trouble with real information. It trickles in. It’s all bad. We get worn out. ‘What? Why the niggling questions? We got it basically right. Tillman’s still dead, isn’t he? Honor his sacrifice. Can’t you honor his sacrifice? [Manly tears]. Besides, what makes him so special? How about we spend a minute on a real hero, Private Ogilvy...’

Probably the real question should be, who is to blame for our misconceptions? The political administration and the army, for encouraging this initial fable? The *SI* boys for laying it on thick, then of course not printing a retraction of similar length and drama, perhaps this time identifying these treacherous shadows more accurately?

Or is it our fault? We love stories so much. Not all those boring facts but the stories that help us negotiate them. We want things to have a point. We want one thing to lead to another, to imagine Pat Tillman charged the enemy with special ability because of those football legs of his. Osama shouldn't have strayed into the secondary, we think, rubbing our hands, because old Pat's going to give him a taste of headhunter tackling.

We really don't know anything. We live in a fairy land of movies, sports writing, and country music ballads.

*Where Men Win Glory*. Why that title? There's no glory here, nor anything close. I'd like to ask Krakauer that question and others. I miss Krakauer in this book. Unlike in his early work, he shows up only briefly, in the third person. I had to read a newspaper piece to learn this interesting bit: Pat Tillman was a Krakauer fan. He'd read all but one of Krakauer's books, and he had that in his pack when he was killed. Tillman's widow, Marie, approached Krakauer with the idea for the project.

I'll take this as a posthumous endorsement. Tillman would have read this book. Though the truth is that it's a grim slog. Reading it is a chore. Parts aren't that great, and the rest is terribly disturbing. You finish it and can't sleep. You feel unclean and wonder if the United States can survive as a country, afloat on the fizzy pop of ignorance.

But if we still think that what Tillman did was noble (rather than naive), then we may owe him a few unpleasant hours. On balance for what he gave up. I'd start at chapter 22. Jessica Lynch's sleepy commander misreads a map and takes his supply convoy into the middle of a hostile Iraqi city. The baffled Iraqis rub their eyes and begin to kill them.

It won't be as much fun as a movie, but we can go back, sluice away the scummy misdirection and half-lies, and learn the truth of who Pat Tillman was and how he gave his life for us.

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