Integrity ... and its absence

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In the three years since Army Cpl. Pat Tillman was killed by friendly fire on a hill in Afghanistan, it has become achingly apparent that his story was never as heroic as it seemed: It was better.

The original story was pretty good: NFL player, stunned by Sept. 11, walks away from a $3.6 million contract offer to enlist with his brother in the Army, and not just the Army, but the elite 75th Ranger Regiment. But since his death, reporters - chiefly Steve Coll and Josh White of The Washington Post and Gary Smith of Sports Illustrated - have discovered a lot more.

Pat Tillman, an intellectual in shoulder pads, hated the Iraq War and thought it was illegal. He went because he thought it was his duty to challenge himself to the fullest. And after a tour in Iraq, he turned down his agent's efforts to get him an early discharge because he'd given his word. Instead, he went to Afghanistan with his buddies.

This kind of integrity is rare, and it makes the Pentagon's fumbling attempts to explain the tragic circumstances of his death, and the unconscionable cover-up that followed it, even more pathetic. The latest of five separate investigations into the friendly fire incident of April 22, 2004, was unveiled this week. And although they answer some questions, they leave big questions unanswered:

Why, even though a dozen other members of Cpl. Tillman's Ranger platoon realized almost immediately what had happened, did the Army hush them up for five weeks?

Why was Kevin Tillman, who served in his brother's platoon but wasn't on the scene when he was killed, given a pack of lies to take home with his brother's body?

Why was a bogus story, with fabricated details, fed to Cpl. Tillman's family and to the public? Why was

the same bogus story cited when the Army awarded him the Silver Star for valor?

"In April 2004, the Army broke faith with the Tillman family in how Pat Tillman's death was reported and briefed to (them)," said Gen. Richard Cody, the Army's Vice Chief of Staff at a Pentagon news conference on Monday.

That much is true. And yet, despite the voluminous release of findings by the Pentagon's acting inspector general and the Army's Criminal Investigation Command, the Tillman family still is not satisfied. His widow, his mother and father and his brother, Kevin Tillman, pronounced the latest findings "shamefully unacceptable." They called for Congress and the news media to conduct further inquiries.

The latest reports are not a total whitewash. They contain solid findings about the fog of war, and they blame four generals (by name) and five other officers, for "critical errors" in the way the incident was handled and reported. But the reports found no evidence of criminal conduct.

Left unanswered is the question of what kind of pressure could have led some of the Army's finest officers to make such serious errors in judgment. The Tillman family long has questioned what role former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his underlings may have played in the decision-making. Robert Gates, who has done so much to let fresh air into the Pentagon since taking over for Rumsfeld last November, should provide them an answer. If he doesn't do it voluntarily, Congress should insist on it.