

End the cover-up

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Does President George Bush revere the honorable traditions of our armed forces and respect the brave men and women who have volunteered for duty? Or does he see the military as just another cog in the White House political machine, something to manipulate in unsavory fashion for convenience's sake?

For all the Bush White House's attempts to drape itself in the flag, two recent developments point firmly to the latter view.

First it was unrefuted reporting by The Washington Post and The New Yorker showing that rank-and-file soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were set up to be fall guys in the prisoner abuse scandal by an administration which pushed from the top for brutal new interrogation tactics but ducked the blame when things predictably went wrong.

Now comes the appalling attempts by the White House to keep hidden who ordered the official cover-up of the friendly-fire death in Afghanistan of Pat Tillman, the football star who enlisted in the Army and became a Ranger after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

When Tillman was killed on April 22, 2004, his death was initially said to have occurred in a firefight with the Taliban. But five days later, Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal wrote Gen. John Abizaid, commander of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, an urgent cable in which he related the actual likely manner of Tillman's death. McChrystal urged that President Bush be told "to preclude any unknowing statements by our country's leaders which might cause public embarrassment." Instead, the official fiction about Tillman was repeated for another month.

As outrageous as this was, it has been compounded by a new outrage: an utterly cynical attempt by the White House to hamper a congressional investigation of the cover-up by withholding pertinent documents and e-mails with bizarre claims of "executive branch confidentiality interests."

Just whom is the White House trying to shield? Given that Tillman was by a wide margin the most famous American soldier, and that his death was front-page news, it is reasonable to assume that from President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on down, every senior official would want to be kept updated on the details of his death. Here's what is far-fetched: The idea that Abizaid on his own would unilaterally withhold the real story about Tillman for a month.

Thankfully, the ranking majority and minority members of the House Oversight Committee - Reps. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., and Tom Davis, R-Va. - are working together to end this cover-up. Besides continuing to

seek suppressed documents and e-mails, they have asked Rumsfeld, Abizaid and four other generals to testify at an Aug. 1 hearing.

If these six men are patriots, they will finally reveal who decided to keep the truth about Tillman from the public. If they are political lackeys more interested in protecting the president from fallout than honoring military traditions of duty and honor, they will abet the cover-up. For the good of a nation, we hope they rise to the occasion.

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