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Kucinich Grills Rumsfeld at Tillman Hearing

By Matt Renner
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Democratic Congressman Dennis Kucinich accused Donald Rumsfeld on Wednesday of participating in a widespread cover-up over the circumstances in the death of Army Cpl. Pat Tillman.

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Kucinich, a 2008 presidential candidate, questioned the former secretary of defense during a Congressional investigation into Tillman's death and expressed doubt about the veracity of Rumsfeld's testimony.

The investigation turned to the senior military leadership at the time of Tillman's death. The hearings left key questions unanswered, despite testimony from former military leaders who were in charge of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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In his first public appearance since leaving the Bush administration, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld testified Wednesday that he could not recall how or when he learned of Cpl. Pat Tillman's death. Kucinich accused Rumsfeld of being involved in a string of cover-ups.

"Well, you know, maybe it was good because you actually covered up the Tillman case for awhile, you covered up the Jessica Lynch case, you covered up Abu Ghraib, so something was working for you."

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Rumsfeld asserted that he had not been involved in a cover-up or any attempt to create a false narrative. Kucinich then inquired about the involvement of the Rendon Group, a public relations firm that has previously contracted with the Department of Defense and the CIA in overseas propaganda efforts. Kucinich asked Rumsfeld if the Rendon Group was involved with creating a "press strategy," or media spin for the Tillman incident. Rumsfeld denied the involvement of the group in the Tillman case, but later said that "entities within the DOD" have held contracts with the group. He did not specify whether the contracts were ongoing.

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Under oath, Rumsfeld testified that he could not recall when he learned that the Tillman story being perpetuated by the White House was false. He said that he tried to stay out of the investigation and did not discuss the matter with the president. He repeatedly said that his lack of involvement in the Tillman investigation was intentional because he wanted to avoid "command influence," later adding that he learned of Tillman's death "at a stage when investigations were underway, so I wouldn't have told anyone to do anything."

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The Oversight and Government Reform Committee has been examining the cover-up of the death of Corporal Tillman, the former Arizona Cardinals football star. On April 22, 2004 while on patrol in Afghanistan, Tillman was shot in the head

by an American soldier, an incident often referred to as "friendly fire." Public statements by the military claimed Tillman was killed by Taliban fighters in combat. This patently false explanation was not corrected for over a month, and was only revealed as false after the official story began to collapse. Military officials have been accused of trying to cover up the fratricide by falsifying evidence, altering the statement made by a soldier who witnessed the event, and by posthumously awarding Tillman the Silver Star for valor, implying that he died at the hands of the enemy.

The Army has officially placed the blame for the incident on retired General Philip Kensinger Jr., who was censured Tuesday for a failure of leadership. Kensinger refused to appear before the committee Wednesday and said that he would not comply with a subpoena for his testimony. US marshals have reportedly been unable to track down Kensinger to serve him with the Congressional subpoena.

Wednesday's hearing focused on what the senior military and civilian leadership knew about Tillman's death. Three top-ranking retired generals - Richard Myers, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; John Abizaid, former Central Command leader, and Bryan Brown, former Special Operations commander - all blamed communications breakdowns for their lack of action in the matter. None took personal responsibility for allowing the fabricated story of Tillman's death to be perpetuated.

In his opening remarks, the chairman of the committee, Henry Waxman (D-California), said, "The concealment of Corporal Tillman's fratricide caused millions of Americans to question the integrity of our government, yet no one will tell us when and how the White House learned the truth."

Members of Tillman's family have accused the Bush administration of covering up the fratricide, falsifying a heroic story about Tillman's death in order to exploit his death to try to shore up support for the war in Iraq.

According to the three retired generals who participated in the hearing, none of them informed the White House that the public story of Tillman's death was in doubt. All three generals were included in a memo that specifically asked them to inform the White House that the official story was in question. The memo was written by Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, commander of the Joint Task Force for Afghanistan "in order to preclude any unknowing statements by our country's leaders which might cause public embarrassment if the circumstances of Corporal Tillman's death become public."

It is unclear when the White House learned that the fabricated Tillman narrative was in question. The White House has refused to turn over to Congress internal documents that relate to Tillman's death, citing executive privilege.

Retired General John P. Abizaid, former commander of US Central Command, testified that he did not relay the concerns about the Tillman story because he did not receive the urgent memo from McChrystal in time. Abizaid said the letter was delayed for at least a week because of "reasons of difficulties with our systems within the headquarters," adding later that the memo was marked "deliver during normal duty hours." This explanation was not challenged by members of the committee.

General Brown blamed his failure to bring the memo to the attention of the White House on not being the primary addressee on the memo. He said that he was a secondary addressee and that he figured one of the primary recipients would follow up on the memo.

In the final minutes of the hearing, General Abizaid said, "It is difficult to come to grips with how we screwed this thing up, but we screwed this thing up."

Waxman's closing statements criticized the explanations from Rumsfeld and the generals and made clear that the investigation will continue. "The system didn't work; errors were made; that is too passive. Somebody should be responsible and we are trying to figure that out," Waxman said.

Matt Renner is a reporter and assistant editor for Truthout.

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