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No Coverup in Tillman Case, Rumsfeld Tells House Panel Advertisement

Ex-Defense Chief, 3 Generals Testify About 'Friendly Fire' Killing

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Former defense secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#), making his first appearance on [Capitol Hill](#) since [President Bush](#) relieved him last year, denied yesterday that he or top generals tried to cover up the "friendly fire" death of former football star and Army Ranger [Pat Tillman](#) in [Afghanistan](#) three years ago.

Rumsfeld, at times combative with lawmakers, acknowledged that he urged Pentagon colleagues to "keep an eye on" Tillman when the former [Arizona Cardinals](#) safety gave up a lucrative football contract to enlist in the Army. But he said that he had no memory of when he first learned that Tillman's death on April 22, 2004, might have resulted from fratricide, instead citing the recollection of an aide who attended a meeting with Rumsfeld shortly before the real circumstances of Tillman's death were made public.

"It was badly handled, and errors were made, but . . . I know that I would not engage in a coverup," Rumsfeld told the [House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform](#). Flanked by three current and retired generals, he said: "I know that no one in the [White House](#) suggested such a thing to me. I know that the gentlemen sitting next to me are men of enormous integrity and would not participate in something like that."

Tillman was killed just as the [U.S. military](#) was becoming increasingly bogged down in [Iraq](#) and as horrific allegations of abuse at [Abu Ghraib](#) prison were emerging. The Bush administration initially portrayed his death as an act of heroism against the enemy. Investigators found that the Army destroyed evidence, such as Tillman's clothes; manipulated the story by saying that he was engaged against the enemy when he died; and drew up a misleading Silver Star citation.

Earlier this week, Army Secretary [Pete Geren](#) announced that he had censured a retired three-star general for misconduct and had recommended that he be evaluated for a possible demotion.

The officer, [Lt. Gen. Philip R. Kensinger Jr.](#), refused to appear before the committee, but Rumsfeld, retired Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, former chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#); retired [Army Gen. John P. Abizaid](#), former commander of the [U.S. Central Command](#); and Army Gen. Bryan D. Brown, former commander of the [U.S. Special Operations Command](#), all testified under oath.

Members of Tillman's family, including his mother, Mary, sat in the back of the hearing room and watched the proceeding silently, often with pained expressions. They did not meet with Rumsfeld and made no statements to reporters afterward. Tillman's brother, Kevin, who was in the same convoy as his brother but did not witness the events, told the committee in April that the military engaged in "deliberate and calculated lies" in an effort transform his brother's death into "an inspirational message."

Abizaid appeared to be the most direct in saying that the military mishandled the case, stating that his staff failed to bring to his attention a crucial private e-mail from then-Maj. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who was investigating the case, alerting him that fratricide was strongly suspected. The e-mail to Abizaid -- with copies sent to Kensinger and Brown -- warned that he should alert the president and top Pentagon officials "to preclude any unknowing statements by our country's leaders which might cause

public embarrassment if the circumstances of Corporal Tillman's death becomes public."

The e-mail was sent to Abizaid on April 29, 2004, but he said he thinks he did not see it until around May 6. Brown said that he assumed Abizaid was handling the issue and that he took no action. Abizaid said that when he finally learned of the e-mail, he immediately spoke to Myers, who indicated that he already knew about the possibility of fratricide. Abizaid said he did not contact the president directly, thinking that it was not his responsibility.

"I don't think there was a coverup," Abizaid said. "I think people tried to do the right thing, and the right thing didn't happen."

Myers testified that he has no memory of the conversation with Abizaid but does not dispute it. He said he thinks he learned of the possibility of fratricide at the end of April. Myers said he recalls telling his press adviser, "We need to keep this in mind in case we go before the press. We've just got to calibrate ourselves."

Myers said that he was not required to do anything once he learned of the investigation, because it was an Army matter. He said he assumed that he would have told Rumsfeld if he thought Rumsfeld did not know. "I cannot recall whether or not I did that," he said.



But Rumsfeld stressed he could not recall when he learned that Tillman was mistakenly killed by U.S. forces and whether he learned it from the news media or from Pentagon officials. He said he was told that he learned of the fratricide "sometime after May 20," or just days before the public announcement and weeks after other senior officials found out.

Lawmakers said that the committee's investigation suggests that Rumsfeld's office did not check with many of his aides to verify the "after May 20" account.

"None of you feel that you're personally responsible, but the system itself didn't work," [Rep. Henry A. Waxman](#) (D-Calif.), the committee chairman, said at the end of the hearing. "The system didn't work,' errors were made' -- that's too passive. Somebody should be responsible, and we're trying to figure that out."

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