

# A FIELD POSITION GAME

Mark Kleiman argues that the Democrats should see BushCo's refusal to turn over proof that they buried details about Pat Tillman's death as a godsend. This is the scandal, he argues, over which the Democrats should choose to confront Bush.

This is a Godsend for the Democrats in Congress. The committee shouldn't compromise at all; this is the case we want to go to war over, in the courts and the court of public opinion. The Tillman cover-up is a far smaller scandal than the U.S. Attorney firings, but it's much easier to understand.

Most of the country is only vaguely aware of the Tillman case, since the press has been not very interested in advertising how badly it was fooled, and how supinely it participated in the "Wag the Dog" fooling of the public. But if the facts got out there, everyone, including most of the Republican base, would be outraged. Publicity about the fight over documents and testimony is also publicity about Tillman's "friendly fire" death and the effort to cover it up, so it's a no-win situation for the White House.

Moreover, even the wingnuts are going to have a hard time claiming with a straight face that the President needs to protect the confidentiality of the process by which he decides to ... mislead the public.

To a degree, I agree with Kleiman, as do some of the commenters in this thread. Any time you can manage to put a political issue before the NFL's fans, the issue will have a lot more resonance than something that remains strictly political. And it's just a matter of weeks before Keith Olbermann sits before Sunday Night

football fans (with Tiki Barber at his side—huzzah!!)—I suspect Olbermann is more than capable of explaining the stakes, if the NFL takes an interest in this issue. In other words, this is an issue that can grab the attention of Joe Sixpack in a way that politicization of our judicial system or the deliberate outing of a CIA spy cannot.

Furthermore, I've got a lot more faith that Henry Waxman can pursue a fight with the Administration more effectively than the House Judiciary (the verdict's still out on the Senate Judiciary).

And finally, I always pay attention when Mr. Emptywheel gets wrapped up in coverage. And he watched the coverage of Waxman's first Tillman hearing closely (he's a football fan, but doesn't really know of Tillman's career). The pageantry of the stock footage of Tillman—thanks largely to the Administration's hagiography of Tillman when he enlisted—makes for powerful TV, even accompanying something so boring as a Congressional hearing.

But as someone who recently fell into the trap of believing that Congress would use gifts it received effectively—you know, a whole trial transcript effectively showing that Vice President ordering the outing of a CIA spy—I'm not entirely convinced Tillman will be enough. This is another area where we're in a fight with the Administration over evidence (though note, BushCo did not, technically, invoke privilege—they invoked confidentiality, which they may defend on the grounds that these documents pertain to troop movement). And no matter how much easier the narrative about Tillman's friendly fire death is to tell, it's still going to have to compete with Paris Hilton (or, in the football world, the latest DWI arrest).

What seems to be missing is a coordinated approach that first says, "what is the overriding narrative"? (One possible answer: a disdain for national security and a habit of obstruction.)

And then says, "How do we put the pieces together to make that argument so we can change it?" Tillman, in isolation of a larger goal or strategy, isn't going to do much for us. No matter how unpopular Bush gets, Congress still gives him the tools he wants to make things worse. Until that changes, all the war and football heroes in the world aren't going to help us.