

CONFLATION OF MILITARY AND SPORTS TO GIVE US BASKETBALL GAME ON SHIP USED FOR RENDITION, TORTURE



Colorado-born Abdulrahman al-Awlaki will never get to choose between college sports and the military. A drone strike ordered by Obama killed him in October.

The sickness in American culture today that praises violence has seeped into college athletics in a manner that leaves me cold. I am appalled when college football or baseball teams “honor” the military by incorporating camouflage motifs into their uniforms. College sports are college sports and the military is the military. Yes, in both college sports and the military young people of the same age group are the primary participants, but sports at one time were merely entertaining pastimes and the military ultimately comes down to being about killing and maiming. Directing the team spirit of college sports toward military praise always comes off to me as an attempt to move praise of the military to a level of unquestioning support

that can only have bad consequences.

We have been reminded recently that unquestioning support of college sports also leads to bad consequences. The debacle at Penn State was enabled in large part by the elevation of the Penn State football coaching staff to a level where they were treated as completely above the law, even when it came to sexual abuse of young boys. Unquestioning support of the military (George W. Bush: "You're either with us or against us") likewise has enabled it to move above the law. The Great War on Terror under George W. Bush and Dick Cheney relied heavily on the illegal practices of rendition and torture. Barack Obama, as suggested by Tom Junod, seems to have moved another large step beyond the law into extrajudicial killing:

But what if the the kind of militant who was captured and tortured under Bush is the kind of militant who is simply being killed under President Obama?

Listen to the announcer's words near the beginning of this YouTube of the national anthem being played at a game at this year's NCAA College World Series in Omaha. Why is it necessary to say "And now ladies and gentlemen, please join us in honoring America and those who support our freedom at home and abroad" at a college baseball game? Isn't honoring the country enough? Why do we need more of a military reference beyond the military color guard? This was not a one-off event. Virtually the same script was used at every regional and super-regional game I attended here in Gainesville where teams were vying for the right to go to Omaha, so it clearly is part of the script put into place by the NCAA. Normal home games for the Gators during the regular season did not employ the language.

But now the conflation of the military and college sports has moved to a level where the symbolism is just too warped for me to allow it to go unchallenged. Last year, I was content

merely to spout lots of snark on Twitter about conflating college sports and the military while the 2011 Carrier Classic was played on the USS Carl Vinson. This year, however, my Florida Gators will be playing in the game and it will be held on the USS Bataan. I have written previously on the Bataan. It has a particularly upsetting history, as I quoted Clive Stafford-Smith and the Reprieve project:

USS Bataan is one of the US government's most infamous 'floating prisons'. At least nine prisoners are confirmed to have been held aboard the ship, including Ibn Al-Sheikh Al-Libi, who recently died in mysterious circumstances in Libyan custody.

Al Libi's case reflects the greatest catastrophe of the US rendition programme. In January 2002 he was flown to the USS Bataan, which was then cruising the northern Arabian Sea, and his interrogation began. From there he was rendered to Egypt where he was forced under torture to confess that Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were in league on WMD – statements publicly repeated by George Bush and Colin Powell to justify going to war in Iraq. Many thousands of lives later we all know this to have been false, and Al Libi's journey through the secret prison system ended when he was sent to Libya to disappear. He duly died in Libyan custody in May 2009.

Other prisoners held aboard the USS Bataan include John Walker Lindh and David Hicks.

So the Bataan stands front and center as a symbol for some of the very worst cases of torture in America's descent to "the dark side". Yes, the ship did also find use in relief efforts after Katrina, the Asian tsunami and the earthquake in Haiti, but to bring this

particular ship back as the site for an event that is meant to conflate praise of college sports with praise for the military is just too much for me.

Consider this statement about the game from Ray Mabus, Secretary of the Navy, carried at the University of Florida's sports website:

"The Navy is America's Away Team; when we are on the job, we operate forward around the globe and often out of sight of the American people," said Mabus. "This is a unique opportunity to showcase the Navy and Marine Corps team, and to join together to honor our veterans and active duty military."

So let's celebrate "America's Away Team" on the vessel that "awayed" people under dubious legal circumstances to deliver them into torture and even death. Not me, thank you. I'll pass on attending or watching this game.

Postscript: I wouldn't shell out the \$1000 ticket price for this game anyway. Not only is it set up to conflate sports and the military, it is priced for only the 1%, just as many major college football and basketball tickets are priced. That's why my only season tickets at Florida are for baseball.

I should also add that I hold no malice toward enlisted military personnel. In fact, in my opinion, the proper way for the NCAA to honor military personnel is to (quietly, without self-congratulatory fanfare) provide tickets free of charge to active duty personnel who can attend games. It's just that we should never conflate our favorite college team with the military and, even more importantly, we should never refer to the fighting apparatus of the military as our "team" in anything approaching a sports context as Mabus did. When did the general concept of deployment and use of the military move from a "last resort" to something that we unquestioningly cheer? And how long will the

world be paying the price for us making that transition?