Offensive Lines: Sport-State Synergy in an Era of Perpetual War

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Although relationships between professional sport and the United States military are not new, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a system emerged in which sport culture moved beyond its customary role as an ideological support to the state. In this new configuration, organizations like the National Football League (NFL) integrated Bush administration policy into their business strategy, and the Bush administration built an audience for its military ventures through an association with a brand that attracts more fans each week than a presidential election draws voters once every 4 years. Drawing on discourse surrounding the use of military metaphors in sports commentary, Pat Tillman's death, and NFL Kickoff celebrations, I argue that there is an intensified depth and mutuality to the sport–war nexus, a shift that is indicative of the militarization of everyday life and, simultaneously, of the sportification of political life, in the contemporary United States.

Keywords: *sport; war; NFL; militarism; race; Pat Tillman*

My interest in the relationship between sport and militarism in the context of the War on Terror and the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan grew out of a long-term project on a rather different subject: the racialization of philanthropy and civic responsibility in the United States in the postwelfare reform era. I had submitted an essay based on this work for inclusion in an edited collection on race and identity that was accepted with the suggestion that I update my analysis of the National Football League's (NFL) community service programming to include a consideration of the impact of the events of September 11, 2001 (King, 2005). My first response to this request was one of vague irritation: Why, I grumbled to myself, had it become a requirement for every piece of academic work to respond, in some way, to the events of that day? Without wanting to trivialize the significance of the terrorist attacks or the wars that they have

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been used to justify, or indeed to overlook the responsibility of academics to participate in public life during moments of political unrest and social upheaval, I was wary of positioning September 11 as the center point of modern history and of making analytical connections to it that seemed forced and not particularly useful. Like other scholars who seek to do historically sensitive work, I felt that this proposition reflected a worrying tendency—already born out in popular culture—toward privileging the events of that day above other monumental acts of violence as well as those forms of oppression that are ongoing and systemic, if more mundane. It was with some reluctance, then, that I began pursuing this line of inquiry. I already knew that the NFL had ended their breast cancer-related marketing campaign, which had been the original focus of my analysis, but I had not sought to find out what type of programming, if any, they had replaced it with. It turned out that in the 3 years since the League concluded Real Men Wear Pink in 2001, it had shifted its philanthropic efforts toward militaristic and patriotic projects, some carried out in collaboration with the Bush administration. Perhaps there was a connection worth pursuing here after all.

It goes without saying that professional football—the most watched sport on television with approximately 100 million adult fans—is a prominent feature of American popular culture and a well-established vehicle for the circulation of dominant norms and values. What I found in the course of my research, however, is that the multimillion dollar exhibitions of military muscle that have become a routine component of events such as the Super Bowl are only the most visible expressions of the variety of ways in which sport has been harnessed to the Bush administration's agenda both at home and abroad. Indeed, as research on the Salt Lake City Olympic Games, the 2001 Major League Baseball World Series, and the 2002 Super Bowl suggests, a variety of sporting events and celebrities have become key vehicles for reproducing and channeling militarist and nationalist identifications—and the range of supremacist forces that attend them—since 2001 (Butterworth, 2005; Falcous & Silk, 2005; McDonald, 2005).

Furthermore, as professional leagues such as the NFL incorporate Bush administration policy into their business strategy with the aim of enhancing brand identification and capital accumulation, it appears that a system is emerging in which sport culture has moved beyond its customary role as an ideological support to the corporate state. Therefore, although relationships between sport and the state are not new, there is an intensified depth and mutuality to the sport–war nexus in the present moment—a shift that might be understood as a further indication of the militarization of everyday life, and, simultaneously, of the "sportification" of political life—in the contemporary United States.

Sport and War in American Culture

In an analysis of the racist nationalism that characterizes English sport culture, Paul Gilroy (2001) claims that the line between sport and war is increasingly blurred. On the one hand, the "curious boast" that is a staple chant at England

matches—"two world wars and one world cup, doo dah, doo dah"—suggests, as Gilroy notes, that sport, particularly football, has the "same value as war in the indices of a distinctive national axiology" and that they are "adjacent in the metonymic chain of Britain's reluctant post-imperial nationalisms" (p. xii). On the other hand, and most disturbingly, Gilroy observes, these words imply that war is a sport.

Although the intimate connection between sport and war in English national culture—structured as it is by a historically specific postimperial, racialized class consciousness—plays out quite differently in that national context, Gilroy's proposition presents a useful starting place for thinking about the sport–war nexus in the contemporary United States. There are numerous ways in which the story of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan as sport could be told: We could explore the play-by-play quality of television coverage, which narrates these wars as if they were the Super Bowl. We could think about the complaint by foreign language interpreters that their work is made difficult by the Bush administration's use of so many unfamiliar sports metaphors. Or we could consider the scene in *Fahrenheit 9/11* when Bush, golf club in hand, stares gravely into the camera and says, "I call upon all nations to do anything they can to stop these terrorist killings." Then, breaking into a grin and a chuckle, he turns to the crowd of journalists behind the camera and says, "Now watch this drive."

The stories that follow, however, begin by exploring the discourse that frames sport as war and are presented with the aim of showing just how deeply entangled these two sets of practices have become both at the institutional and psychosymbolic levels. The intention here is not to question Gilroy's assertion that the notion of war as sport presents a more troubling set of assumptions and values than the notion of sport as war. Rather, it is to propose that it is the idea that sport represents a surrogate for war—even as this relationship is repeatedly disavowed in public discourse—that has allowed sport culture in general, and the NFL in particular, to be incorporated into Bush administration policy and public relations efforts and, concomitantly, for the NFL to seek out a marketing partnership with a war-consumed state.

We need to only think of the everyday practice of describing sporting competitions, rivalries, strategies, and plays in the language of military force to understand how sport in the United States, especially football, generates many of the same emotions and investments as war (Jansen & Sabo, 1994): Quarterback heroes throw bombs under the orders of generals who devise game strategies in war rooms; defensive warriors seek to blitz the offensive line; a series of completed passes constitutes an aerial attack; and tied games result in sudden death overtimes. For a few weeks following the events of September 11, 2001, however, sport pundits placed a voluntary moratorium on the use of such terminology. Although their decision had the potential to prompt some reflection on the nature of commercial sport culture in the United States, it was articulated very quickly to the narrative of lost innocence and harsh new realities that framed the popular response to the attacks. Prior to the fall of 2001, such words and images

had seemed naïve, harmless, and even pure, wrote the numerous commentators who rushed to make note of this shift in newspaper columns across the country. But not any more, they claimed with characteristic historical amnesia. Injury, violence, death, and war were now an authentic part of the American experience and for this reason, if no other, they deserved to be taken seriously:

> Suddenly, even innocent nicknames we took for granted have taken on a different appearance. The Bronx Bombers? Please no. . . . Also, can anyone ever again call Bob Knight "The General" without showing disrespect to the real generals and their troops? How can sports adapt to a shattered world? It can start by losing the military references and war metaphors. (Molinaro, 2001, p. C1)

> I am a Baby Boomer and my generation has known a little of conflict and tragedy. But we missed the World Wars and we missed the Great Depression and we grew up with the blessing of being able to feel pretty safe on these shores. Most of our disasters have been at the movies. We have talked of football games as war. But that collapsed Tuesday, as surely as two skyscrapers in lower Manhattan. What we saw, this day, was war. (Lopresti, 2001, p. C3)

> Athletes and their coaches, managers, and trainers often speak of what they do as if it were a battle, even war. Calling it a game would apparently diminish sport's importance compared with military aggression . . . until the real thing hits. The real thing hit Tuesday. (Hirsley cited in Gaining Perspective, 2001)

> These performers commanding king's ransoms are blessed with special talents, but they're not heroes or super heroes . . . Let's put a muzzle on trash talk and all war metaphors. (Spencer, 2001, p. C1)

By midseason, military metaphors were back with a vengeance, however, as coaches and journalists blithely peppered their pregame talks and postgame commentaries with liberal sprinklings of death and destruction (Yockey, 2003). This practice continued with the start of the occupation of Iraq, although something of a double standard arose in terms of who could legitimately deploy the language of war.

In November 2003, Kellen Winslow, a tight end for the University of Miami, and favorite pick for this year's NFL draft, had lost his cool in a press conference after a loss to Tennessee, telling a room full of reporters: "It's war. They're out to kill you, so I'm out there to kill them. . . . I'm a fucking soldier. Now get away from me or I'll go off" (Mumper, 2003). Winslow was roundly criticized in the media for his remarks and benched by his coach for the subsequent game. The player apologized the next day in a statement released by the university, which read:

> What I have learned from this experience is to take my triumphs and failures in stride. My outburst should in no shape or form be a reflection on this institution or the Miami football program. As for my reference to being a soldier in war, I meant no disrespect to the men and women who have served, or are currently serving, in the armed forces. I cannot begin to imagine the magnitude of war or its consequences. (Mumper, 2003)

Shortly thereafter, in May 2004, Minnesota Timberwolf Kevin Garnett was castigated for his use of a series of military metaphors to describe an upcoming

play-off game with the Sacramento Kings. The series up to that point was marked by trash talking and hard fouls and when asked about the importance of the deciding game, Garnett told reporters:

> This is it. It's all for the marbles. I'm sitting in the house loading up the pump, I'm loading up the Uzis, I've got a couple of M-16s, couple of nines, couple of joints with some silencers on them, couple of grenades, got a missile launcher. I'm ready for war. (Lupica, 2004, p. 68)

In an apology the next day that was remarkably similar in content to the statement issued by Winslow a few months earlier, Garnett said:

> Sincerely, I apologize for my comments earlier. I didn't mean to offend anybody. I'm a young man, and I understand when I'm appropriate, and this is totally inappropriate. I was totally thinking about basketball, not reality. I was just metaphorically trying to come up with a way to talk about the enormity of the game. (Murillo, 2004, p. 20)

Although, in both instances, there were a handful of commentators who noted that the American public should probably be more worried about the use of inappropriate sports metaphors among politicians and army generals (Caple, 2004), the overwhelming response was to lambaste Winslow and Garnett as ignorant, spoiled celebrities who play games for a living and who thus have no concept of the harsh reality of war. As an editorial in the *Montgomery Advertiser* put it:

> War is when real automatic weapons and real missile launchers are aimed and fired at you. War is what U.S. soldiers and Marines are fighting and dying in. You are being paid outrageous amounts to play a game. That's all. (Real wars kill, 2004, p. 8)

The apologies released by the players reinforced this position, in both cases concluding with reference to the fiction of basketball and the reality of war and the players' respective inability to comprehend a world outside the comfort of professional sport.

The fact that all the major sport institutions in the United States, including the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the National Basketball Association, have, to varying extents, harnessed their brand image to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq somehow escapes the same level of scrutiny. This erasure is particularly remarkable given that their marketing campaigns encourage fans to identify with a whitewashed image of military service and of war itself from the comfort of the bleachers or the couch. Perhaps what was ultimately so damaging about Winslow's and Garnett's outbursts, then, was that their words—unlike the slightly more abstract language usually deployed by commentators—made so explicit and visceral the conflict, violence, and destruction on which these promotional campaigns ultimately depend.

As numerous researchers have noted, there is also a racial logic that structures the American public's love–hate relationship with professional Black male athletes and its often self-righteous and duplicitous critique of their supposedly brattish

behavior and outlandish lifestyles (Andrews, 1996; Boyd, 2003; Cole & Andrews, 1996; Leonard, 2004; McDonald, 1996). In other words, Winslow and Garnett, who are both Black, were quickly admonished by a predominantly White media whose adoration for celebrity athletes coexists alongside a thinly veiled discourse that constructs these stars as overpaid thugs who are unable to handle the rewards of middle- or upper-class existence and whose lives off the field thus comprise an endless cycle of bar brawls, drug stings, attempted sexual assaults, paternity suits, and domestic violence charges. In this context, it is difficult for this same audience to recognize the key commonalities between professional athletes as a social group and an ideological category and military service personnel as a social group and an ideological category.

Gamal Abdel-Shehid (2002) argues that athletes and soldiers of color (mostly male) play a key role in the reproduction of U.S. hegemony and dominant ideological values at home and abroad. Black men, in particular, are overrepresented in both the military and professional sport—institutions that are crucial to the assertion and maintenance of the political, cultural, and economic supremacy of the United States. They fight wars on behalf of their leaders, literally in the case of soldiers, and figuratively in the case of athletes whose labor in both domestic and international competition is central to the reproduction of U.S. national identity. Although a select few athletes reap huge financial rewards for their efforts, in both sporting and military institutions, the economic security offered to workers in exchange for their labor is more often than not short term. At the same time, the prominence of men of color in these fields masquerades as evidence of the egalitarian character of U.S. society rather than as an effect of highly limited opportunities for upward mobility in a racialized, capitalist social formation. Any suggestion of figurative equivalence between war and sport, especially when voiced by those whose labor is crucial to the reproduction of these systems of exploitation through statements that make their position as workers explicit, must therefore be swiftly recuperated.

The Tillman Effect

Just 2 weeks before Garnett made his Ready for War remarks, the media had been awash with another set of commentaries contrasting the politically oblivious, self-centered, and pampered figure of the professional athlete with the committed, selfless, and super-tough figure of the military recruit. This time, the abstract men and women of the armed forces became concretized, if mythologized, in the figure of Pat Tillman, the 27-year-old former safety with the Arizona Cardinals who famously turned down a US$3.6 million NFL contract in 2002 to enlist in the army. Tillman was killed in Afghanistan on April 21, and his death generated a flood of media attention. Initially, U.S. Army Special Operations Command claimed that he was killed by Taliban soldiers in a fight that warranted the award of a posthumous Silver Star for combat valor. The April 30 statement read as follows:

> He ordered his team to dismount and then maneuvered the Rangers up a hill near the enemy's location. As they crested the hill, Tillman directed his team into firing positions and personally provided suppressive fire. . . . Tillman's voice was heard issuing commands to take the fight to the enemy forces. (Coll, 2004, p. A1)

On May 29, however, the Army acknowledged in a short statement that Tillman was probably killed by friendly fire. In a two-part *Washington Post* investigative series published in December 2004, writer Steve Coll argued that the "records show that Tillman fought bravely and honorably until his last breath. They also show that his superiors exaggerated his actions and invented details as they burnished his legend in public, at the same time suppressing details that might tarnish Tillman's commanders" (p. A1).

Although this part of the story is significant for what it reveals about the importance of a heroic death for the Army's image, it is unclear to what extent the discourse surrounding these events would have differed if the public had been aware of the friendly fire accusations at the time of his death. For, the endless series of tributes and dedications from celebrities, politicians, and NFL staff and players were predictably focused on the fact of his death rather than why he died:

> Pat knew that he would not have the life that he had and the opportunities he had if those before him had not made sacrifices. Money, material possessions, luxury cars, huge mansions—those things meant nothing to Pat. Integrity, relationships with family, friends, and teammates meant everything. (Jim Rome quoted in Gathright, 2004, p. A1)

> Tillman's choice certainly seems a rare, selfless gesture in Me-centric times. (della Cava, 2004, p. D8)

> The fans are tired of these prima donnas. Tillman was the exact opposite: a man of honor and dignity and morals. (Joannie Butch quoted in Boeck, 2004, p. C1)

> In an age of self-centered superstar athletes, the four-year NFL veteran set himself apart. (Gathright, 2004, p. A1)

> Nowadays, genuine role models in professional sports are few and far between, but Tillman proved that there are still heroes in sports. (Representative Jeff Flake, R-Ariz. quoted in Davenport, 2004)

> In today's world of instant gratification and selfishness, here is a man that was defined by words like loyalty, honor, passion, courage, strength and nobility. He is a modern day hero. (Seattle Seahawks General Manager Bob Ferguson quoted in Boeck, 2004, p. 1C)

Alongside these tributes, U.S. Representative Jeff Flake of Arizona planned a series of speeches on the floor of the House of Representatives in honor of the soldier. Representative John Shadegg sent a Gold Star banner to Tillman's family, and Senator George Allen of Virginia wrote a letter to Paul Tagliabue, the NFL commissioner at the time, asking the league to dedicate the season to Tillman and

other U.S. soldiers serving in the War on Terror (Davenport, 2004; Wilner, 2004). Two weeks later, 3,000 people came to a memorial staged for Tillman in his hometown of San Jose. The service was televised live on ESPN and speakers included Senator John McCain as well as Maria Shriver, who read a tribute from her husband, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Back in the state where Tillman played his college and professional football, Governor Janet Napolitano ordered flags flown at half mast, a scholarship in his name was announced, and the Cardinals declared their intention to retire his jersey after the 2004 season and to name the square surrounding their new stadium, the Pat Tillman Freedom Plaza. Even the White House made a rare acknowledgment of a casualty of war when it released a statement calling Tillman an inspiration both on and off the football field.

The response to Tillman's death made it clear that unlike Garnett and Winslow, whose demand for compensation for their labor is made highly visible and suspect, Tillman was that most ideal of neoliberal citizens: the volunteer who made the ultimate sacrifice and gave with his life. Moreover, his decision to enlist was framed, like the broader discourse on volunteerism, in ways that erased the labor of those whose choice to enter military service was more constrained than his own, as well as the pain and suffering of those numerous civilians, mostly poor and working class, who have lost friends and relatives in these conflicts. This point is exemplified by a *Sports Illustrated* cover story on Tillman's death in which the following claim appeared:

> The news whistled through America's soul and raised the hair on the back of its neck. It tapped into people's admiration, their awe, their guilt. In a country where no civilians have been asked to sacrifice anything and where even the cost of the war is being forwarded to their children and their children's children, a man had sacrificed the biggest dream of all. The NFL. (Smith, 2004, p. 46)

In focusing on his death rather than on why he died, these dedications constituted sacrifice as the goal rather than asking whether the sacrifice itself made any sense. That is, they allowed the sacrifices made by Tillman and by so many others to justify the war, regardless of its goals or the brutality of the everyday practices that sustain it.

This approach also allowed Tillman's death to become a focal point at the 2004 NFL draft. Wearing a black ribbon inscribed with Tillman's name, and flanked by 5 marines and 11 veterans, Commissioner Tagliabue told the crowd in a speech that sounded much like an announcement of a new marketing agreement, "Pat Tillman personified the best values of America and of the National Football League. Like other men and women protecting our freedom around the globe, he made the ultimate sacrifice and gave his life for his country" (Wilner, 2004, online). A moment of silence was then held in Tillman's honor, after which the crowd chanted, "U-S-A, U-S-A"—the mantra that now moves so freely back and forth between the playing field and the battlefield, between little girls at women's soccer matches and fatigue-clad marines in military camps, between pregame talks in the locker room and pep rallies for troops about to be deployed. Notwithstanding periodic attempts to underscore the differences between war

and sport, and despite the fact that Tillman's story was relentlessly told and retold to this end, a ceremony to honor his death became a vehicle through which sport and war were once again rendered equivalent (Wilner, 2004).

Capitalizing on War

That the NFL should make last minute changes to the carefully orchestrated draft celebration to incorporate a tribute to Tillman should come as no surprise given the league's brand-building activities in the period since September 11, 2001. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center, the NFL had made a multimillion dollar commitment to encourage tourism in New York City by providing free promotional time on radio and television networks, donating money to the city's September 11 commemoration, and establishing the NFL Disaster Relief Fund. The relationship between the league and the city culminated, in September 2002, in the inaugural Kickoff Live, a glitzy, star-studded music and football festival held in Times Square to celebrate the launch of the new season.

NFL executives had been thinking about ways to make the season launch a more prominent event in the sports calendar for some time prior to the fall of 2001 and the Kickoff (billed in publicity materials as a "tribute to the American spirit, the resiliency of New Yorkers, and the fact that post-9/11, New York City remains one of the premier tourist destinations in the world" [www.nfl.com]) provided a perfect forum to test this idea. Although the NFL enjoys the healthiest television ratings of any major sport in the United States, the league is trying to prevent its audience figures from suffering the intense erosion experienced by its competitors in recent years by broadening its overall brand recognition to win new fans, especially among women, teenagers, and children. The NFL's target demographic groups were made clear in the choice of performers who took to the stage in Times Square: Jon Bon Jovi, Eve, Alicia Keys, Enrique Iglesias, and 'N SYNC's Joey Fatone who appeared with his fellow cast members from the Broadway musical *Rent*. The event drew approximately 500,000 attendees and was covered by 120 media outlets worldwide. Moreover, according to NFL figures, television ratings for the opening slate of games increased by 11% following the broadcast of the Kickoff and helped produce a 5.5% improvement in average per-game viewership for the season.

The Kickoff event and the philanthropic projects it was used to promote fit perfectly within the framework of the dominant national response to the terrorist attacks. Although the Bush administration pursued military retaliation overseas, ordinary Americans were told that they could best help the nation to recover from this tragedy by doing two things: consuming and volunteering. In this context, the Kickoff offered an accessible and efficient vehicle through which citizens could fulfill both expectations at once, either as consumers of football who donated money to the NFL fund (giving money was a frequently cited example of the types of volunteerism in which Americans could engage) or as tourists to New York City. Like so many recently created cogs in the machinery of philanthropic production in the United States, the NFL campaigns encouraged people

to do good for others at the same time that they went about their everyday practices of consumption, as well as providing the league with an opportunity to market itself as a properly patriotic corporate citizen.

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the NFL shifted the emphasis of its post-9/11 community outreach activities away from disaster relief and tourist promotion to more explicitly patriotic and militaristic projects carried out in collaboration with the Bush administration: NFL players have made numerous trips to visit injured soldiers; the league pledged to donate football equipment to all teams associated with the military; and it has also worked in partnership with the government on Operation Tribute to Freedom, a program designed to "reinforce the bond between the citizen and the military" and to "help Americans express their support for the troops who are returning from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and who continue to fight in the ongoing effort toward victory in the global war on terrorism" (www.nfl.com).

It was under the auspices of the Tribute to Freedom program that the league staged the second Kickoff Live (presented by Pepsi Vanilla, the "Not-Too-Vanilla Vanilla") in September 2003. This time the Kickoff took place on the National Mall in Washington D.C. and included performances by Britney Spears, Aerosmith, Mary J. Blige, and Aretha Franklin, who sang the national anthem. The 300,000-strong crowd included 25,000 troops and their families shipped in for the event by the Department of Defense with the promise of a free t-shirt and prime concert viewing. Publicity materials noted that the purpose of this "new tradition" was to "celebrate the resilient and indomitable spirit of America" (www.nfl.com) through a focus on veterans of the "Global War on Terrorism." Following the concert, the season opener between the Washington Redskins and the New York Jets was televised on a series of jumbotrons erected especially for the occasion.

With the help of US$2.5 million dollars from cosponsors Pepsi, the NFL paid US$10 million dollars to stage this peculiar, though oddly synchronistic, mixture of patriotic, hypermasculine, family friendly entertainment. As a series of articles in *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times* pointed out, this was the first time in history that a private business had been permitted to take over most of the land between the Monument and the Capitol grounds, and for 11 days to boot (Barker, 2003; Fisher, 2003; Montgomery, 2003). Although the event was framed as a philanthropic public service, most likely in order to comply with rules about commercial activities on the Mall, the NFL was clearly the financial and creative driving force behind the event: Paul Tagliabue apparently proposed the idea to General Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in May of that year. Moreover, the extent to which the military presence was micromanaged is evidenced in the claim made by David Montgomery of *The Washington Post* that "at the request of the NFL, the Pentagon encouraged service people to wear their short-sleeve, open-collar uniforms, to make a good impression on TV" (2003, p. C1). Although the Pentagon is officially prohibited from participating in corporate promotions, by folding the Kickoff into the Tribute to Freedom program, it was able to promote the event quite freely on its Web site and in communications with service personnel.

The Department of the Interior, which includes the National Park Service, the steward of the Mall, was also a partner in the event. Interior Secretary Gale Norton spoke at Kickoff-related activities (including a press conference with Britney Spears) to promote the Department's Take Pride in America campaign. This initiative encourages volunteerism on the nation's rapidly diminishing public lands in lieu of the paid labor force and environmental regulations that have been so dramatically rolled back under the current administration. In return, the NFL sponsored public service announcements toward this end and placed Take Pride in America signs around the Mall, making this all encompassing term the official slogan of the event.

War: What Is It Good For?

Although I began the essay by noting that dramatic performances such as the Super Bowl, or indeed the Kickoff, are only the most visible and predictable of the ways in which sport culture has been bound to the Bush administration's agenda, my aim has been to highlight the constant, everyday, and mutually reinforcing character of the relationship between the culture of sport and the culture of war that undergirds such spectacles. In this context, it is worth noting that the events on the Mall were the culmination of 7 days jam-packed with activities designed to enhance sport-state-military synergy: The week had begun with an Oval office meeting between NFL executives, George Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice, during which Bush was presented with a football inscribed with the words, "the first football of the 2003 season, presented to President George W. Bush, with deep appreciation" (www.nfl.com), and it had ended with a football game broadcast via Armed Forces Radio and Television to U.S. troops around the world.

Although the marketing alliance between the NFL and the Bush administration is revealing of the symbolic interpenetration of war and sport in the United States, it is also a product of an increasingly privatized state—and military establishment—that is fighting a deeply privatized war. Although, historically, the NFL has positioned itself as the most military-identified of all the major leagues in the United States, until recently its role was confined to providing occasional ideological support in the form of athlete visitations with troops about to ship out to Vietnam or Air Force flyovers during the Super Bowl. In its new capacity as something akin to a for-profit marketing arm of the government, immersed in ongoing relationships with a variety of departments and offices, we might think of the NFL as a Department of Propaganda, neoliberal style.

This is not simply a one-way relationship with the NFL providing ideological support to the government, however. Instead, in this new configuration of sport-state relations, the NFL sends players to provide support for the troops, but the military also sends troops to provide support for the NFL. The effect is a neatly crafted synergy in which the Bush administration builds a supportive audience for its military ventures through an association with a brand that draws more fans on a weekly basis than a presidential election draws voters once every 4 years and in

which the NFL develops its markets by an association with a presidency—and a particular strand of racialized nationalism—that is more jock-like in its approach to war, and arguably to policy in general, than any that preceded it. In this context, and in spite of relentless attempts to distinguish sporting prowess from military might, it becomes increasingly hard within U.S. national culture to discern where the war ends and the games begin and, more crucially, why we are playing in the first place.

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