Wartime coverage is a difficult operation to undertake, because the nature of war is shadowy and fraught with many dangers, and it is often impossible to get out the truth. Governments have to find the line between adequately informing the public and keeping certain things under wraps. However, the current administration has used people in the war, specifically Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman, as political pawns to shape war coverage, and in the midst of doing so, mangled and fabricated their stories in order to control the public face of the war.

In March 2003, as the war against Iraq began, support was high, with a Gallup Poll for CNN and USA Today reporting that 79% were in favor (Milbank and VandeHei), but as the war continued throughout 2003 and 2004 and was rocked by a number of “scandals”, including the stories of Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman as discussed in this paper, support waned considerably in 2004 (“Poll: Fading Support for Iraq War”). Even when the war first began, a barrage of bad news flooded the press. For the first three weeks, reports came back of ambushes, air strikes, and heavy casualties, and many high-level government officials were worried that the war was getting a terrible public image (Eviatar 18). Jessica Lynch, the blonde 19 year-old prisoner of war whose capture and subsequent rescue was played for a patriotic agenda, was used, perhaps unwittingly, as a pawn by both the media and the government to drum up support through the use of a hero figure, which was necessary as the war was not going as planned. A year later, Pat Tillman, the ex-NFL star who resigned to fight, was killed in Afghanistan by friendly fire. His story was also mishandled by the news media, fed pumped-up and misleading reports by the military, and he, too, became a symbol of the war’s heroic face. Both Lynch and Tillman’s backgrounds were used to further the agenda of selling a war to an American public, without answering any of the difficult questions that plague such an undertaking. The media, eager to report feel-good stories with ready-made heroes, bought into this agenda. It was easy, and it
wasn’t until questions arose about the validity of the story that people began taking a second look.

Feel-good war stories, once the war has started, are one version of propaganda; they are a way of shifting the focus on the war from the policy planner, the ones who really are responsible for what is going on in the world, to the individual soldier, according to Sourcewatch. This brings a personal side to the story, and makes the conflict easier to relate to for many individuals who are uninterested in politics. These stories, such as the “heartwarming” Jessica Lynch tale, are also used as a tactic for the general masses to continue to support the war and their troops, to keep them appeased and away from any harmful affects of the war. Pat Tillman’s story, as a pro football star who resigned his position to enter the Army, was another attempt by the government and the news media, fed specific information with a duty to report it, to promote a brave young man with true American values. The Army tried to cover up his death because it was unheroic and an unsatisfying conclusion to the story they wanted Americans to hear.

**Jessica Lynch: The Media’s Report**

This section of the paper focuses on Lynch’s story as reported by the two biggest newsmagazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*, which both featured her on the cover during 2003, as well as alternative news sources and journalism critiques by less mainstream organizations. Included as well were the first initial sceptical reports, by the British sources of the BBC News and *The Guardian*, both written by the same person, John Kampfner, and the *Washington Post* investigation, which became the template for subsequent stories by other American news organizations.

Lynch’s story was, at first, misreported by the American mainstream media, specifically *The Washington Post*. Their initial reporting, “She Was Fighting to the Death”, was exactly how
the title portrayed it: jingoistic and sensational, and that story was picked up by thousands of other news sources; even papers who did their own reporting largely relied on the Post’s account, according to a analysis of the media coverage by the *American Journalism Review* (Sussman 23-25). Most of the initial reports, whether from newspapers like the *Post* or magazines like *Newsweek*, all read like this. Their leads were not dry, just-the-facts-ma’am reportage, or even necessarily anecdotal, but they all contained heated elements of suspense and victory. They tugged at the heartstrings, and reading a string of these war stories, including her “tell-all” book, *I am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, one is easily swept into the heroic and daring story of a young girl caught in the crossfire. In this regard, the media did a good job, since clearly a skeptic who is actively researching every end of the tale would purposely not want to get swept up in any hyperbole. These reports also managed to whip up the American media, and by extension, the American public, into a frenzy over the skillfulness of the reporting.

But the first stories, those in early April, were all exaggerated. While many of those, including the original *Washington Post* writers, Vernon Loeb and Susan Schmidt, conceded that their reporting could have benefited from stronger sourcing and acknowledgements within the article itself about how sketchy the reporting actually was (Ritea), this was not fully admitted until weeks later, and then any corrections were small and placed inside the paper, after the jump, where it is known that people tend to not read. While that is the nature of journalism—corrections never get as much coverage as the mistaken reports—Jessica Lynch’s story, to this day, stands as an example of the media blindly following the government’s report, seemingly eager to deliver the good news. Only foreign journalists offered any initial skepticism, since officials, according the *Guardian*, felt that the way the Americans handled the press coverage of the event was “overblown” and sensationalized. American media later acknowledged the BBC’s
claims, although they also maintained that the British themselves, using the phrase “one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived” (Kampfner, “Saving Private Lynch Story Flawed”), used a sensational sentence in order to attack American media with having supporting statements, despite conceding that the story was “enhanced” (Sussman 23).

Mainstream news coverage, especially in April and May 2003, centered on her heroic story. Completely jumping on the bandwagon, each report was filled with heavily descriptive writing, dramatic and vivid. Much of the secondhand reporting, especially of critiques in journalism journals and alternative press done months later, concluded that her capture and rescue was a case of perfect timing matched with perfect circumstances, in the fact that she was young, blond, and sweet, a girl who joined the Army right before September 11 (in fact, she left for basic training a week afterward) (Gibbs) as a way to earn money and see the world, so she could get out of her small, poor West Virginia town. Her story also managed to sweep away questions of the war, the hard, unanswerable ones, and perpetrated the kind of myths that Americans like to believe about war and about themselves: that they are heroic people, liberating others in the name of freedom.

In this regard, the press unwittingly went along with government spiel. Because what little the Army said was enough to create a story, create one they did: “The announcement was a godsend to the press corps, which loves ‘firsts,’ lives for ‘people’ stories, and goes crazy over any rescue. Reporters at last could deliver the straightforward, emotionally fulfilling saga of good beating evil that America expects,” as the Columbia Journalism Review wrote (Hanson). Jessica Lynch was “the first successful rescue of a U.S. POW behind enemy lines since World War II” (Hanson), and the fact that she was a pretty, young white woman cannot be discredited. This is considered an unusual event, especially as she was a supply clerk who was not meant to
see battle. Of course events like this are going to be used for publicity; in a war situation, anything that stands out is going to be exploited for maximum potential, and it is easy for the public to sympathize with Lynch, even with her comrades. Her story was an unconscious version of damage control.

While many of the people who reported on the story refused to completely renounce their reporting, including Vernon Loeb, the writer of the original Washington Post story, they were complicit in the myth-making saga. It is understandable that a reporter would not want to discredit their own work for fear of jeopardizing his career or his superiors, including the publication they work for, but it also underlies the basic problem with the mainstream media, and puts them in line for following the dominant ideology, of making war into a heroic spectacle, a Hollywood hero. Even later reports, including the account in her book and Time’s cover story in November 2003 explaining “what really happened to her” (Gibbs), are written sentimentally, a true human interest feature in the most damning of terms for that category. Lynch herself never comes off negatively, since the entire controversy happened around her, but throughout all phases of her saga, the connections between the government, the military, and the press are extremely hazy and tenuous. Because it was such a sensational story, the power elite want to keep it in the news as much as possible, which explains why months later she is still widely reported on, in follow-ups.

As originally reported on April 3, 2003, by the Washington Post, Jessica Lynch was ambushed along with the rest of the 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company on March 23 in Nasiriyah. She fought the Iraqis “fiercely” and shot several soldiers despite having multiple gunshot wounds and being stabbed. (Schmidt and Loeb) Although there was mention in the article of the tenuousness of the intelligence given, since much of it was considered “rumors”
and was not finalized, according to unnamed army and government officials, it did not seem to matter. In reality, according to the Counterpunch narrative, Lynch was driving a 5-ton truck with an attached equipment trailer, following the 3rd Mechanized Infantry Division on its way to Baghdad. For over two days, the unit, part of larger crew, drove over dark, windy and sand-swept terrain, until the truck died. Lynch was then seated on her company’s first sergeant’s Humvee, driven by her friend and fellow tired soldier Lori Pietsewa. Along the highway, there were checkpoints. Although they had GPS navigation systems, there was no backup if they failed, and as a supply and support crew they were not expected to navigate, especially as they were part of a line of personnel driving into Nasiriyah. As the sun rose, Lynch and her Humvee realized they were lost, confused by directions given by their superiors and the discrepancies between those and the GPS system readings. They ended up getting lost and drove into Iraqi territory. Intelligence reports, which were widely examined and debated in the press, had told them that the Iraqis would either be friendly or surrender. Sleep-deprived and massively confused, the convoy tried to turn around, but ended up within the line of fire. The Humvee ended up crashing within a firestorm. Lynch managed to escape the totaled vehicle. Many reported here that she tried to shoot her rifle, which in the original story worked, but later was said to be dirty and clogged with sand, completely worthless. With several broken bones and a gaping head wound, she fell unconscious, and it is here that the next few hours cannot be recalled because she does not remember. (Goff)

She was taken by Iraqis to the Nasiriyah military hospital, then later to Saddam hospital a few miles away. Iraqi doctors treated her. Seven days later, despite being a prisoner of war, she was ordered to return to the American military, and was put in an ambulance, since they are protected under the Geneva Conventions and should not be fired upon. (Goff) Yet they were, and
this “rescue” was filmed, a move widely criticized as “a Hollywood film” (Kampfner, “The Truth About Jessica”) by both American and British media. The government, like they often do, tried to backpedal the results of the video, calling “the breathless movie script” “‘a comedy of errors’” instead of a “conscious public relations ploy”, as it seemed (Gibbs). Lynch was a pawn, used to shore up attention and support for a war that seemed vastly removed from the majority of Americans. Putting a human face—and such a pretty one at that—against the horrors of combat is a surefire way of garnering attention.

**Pat Tillman: A Political Pawn**

Although Pat Tillman’s death was also spun, he received far less coverage in terms of the length of his story. Unlike Jessica Lynch, who graced the cover of many a magazine, Pat Tillman was eulogized in all the press reports of his death in the days following April 22, 2004. Many of these were blurbs in big publications, like *Time* or *Newsweek*, or were given space in sports-related media, like *Sports Illustrated* or *ESPN The Magazine*. Although his story still lingers on, he was not given much space in the newsmagazines, but was covered by papers that were close to the source, like the *San Francisco Chronicle*, since that is his hometown paper, and the *Washington Post*. He is the most famous casualty of the war, and as he died in Afghanistan, he is considered part of the War on Terror and Operation Enduring Freedom. Posthumously awarded the Silver Star for “his audacious leadership and courageous example under fire” (Fish, “Playing with Friendly Fire”), his memorial was broadcast on ESPN live from the Municipal Rose Garden in San Jose, California, his hometown, on May 3.

The world, at that time, soaked in his flag-draped funeral. It was hard not to feel sad hearing his story, a man of such integrity that he would give up a three year, $3.6 million contract for the Arizona Cardinals to fight, especially as it was well known that he did not care
for Bush or for the Iraq War among his friends and family (Fish, “Death of An American Ideal”). However, Tillman was a complicated figure, a man who was not religious, and still was considered a smart and extraordinary person, and his celebrity and personality was exploited by the government as a humbled, principled American who stood for the values of the country. It can be argued that the government did not want his real, anti-Iraq War, anti-Bush administration views to become public knowledge, and instead puffed up other attributes to make him seem larger than life.

Although Pat Tillman still stands for the honorable honesty he so valued in his own life, the cover-up over his death that eventually was discovered did him a great disservice. Even before he was awarded his Silver Star and even before his funeral, superiors in the Army had already known that he was killed by friendly fire. The Tillman family themselves were not notified—although certain Army brass knew within hours after his death—until the end of May, six weeks after he had died (Fish, “An Un-American Tragedy”).

His name was kept briefly in the news media by mentions by President Bush when the Arizona Cardinals opened their season in the fall by retiring his jersey (“Pat Tillman Timeline”), but for the most part his death was eclipsed by bigger news—the upcoming presidential election, for one. It wasn’t until the Washington Post printed a two-part, front-page series investigating his death in early December 2004 that he become news again. Over the previous months, the Tillman family had pushed for investigations into why their son had died by friendly fire, and whose fault it was, and why their son, they believed, was used as a political pawn.

The Post story is a summary of the actions that took place on the night of his death, and is concise and has strong language, specifically pinpointing what went wrong, citing “botched communications, a mistaken decision to split his platoon over the objections of its leader, and
negligent shooting by pumped-up young Rangers…who failed to identify their targets as they
blasted their way out of a frightening ambush” (Coll, “Barrage of Bullets”). The articles do go
into a play-by-play, including extensive interviews with soldiers and Army superiors, and are the
first in a series to tell the wider story. There are currently four investigations, by the Army and
the government, on Pat Tillman’s death, each by different people and often offering
contradictory information, changed testimony and important names redacted by the Army. As
each one become public, another in-depth article by a major newspaper was published: In May
2005, the Washington Post published several articles as a news/follow-up; the San Francisco
Chronicle in September 2005, and finally, ESPN Magazine in July 2006, each elaborating on the
massive confusion and cover-up of Pat Tillman’s death.

What is clear is that he was killed by friendly fire, but the questions that still linger,
prompted by the family, using his celebrity and government officials to provide pressure on the
Army to investigate (Fish, “Playing With Friendly Fire”) are who should be blamed, and what
punishments should they get—the senior officials who allowed his convoy to separate, the
soldiers who should have known not to shoot at an unidentified target, and the role the Army has
in hiding the information from the public and his family but also puffing up his image to increase
support for the war.

According to several published reports and eyewitness accounts, Pat Tillman, part of the
“Black Sheep” squad, otherwise known as 2\textsuperscript{nd} Platoon, A Company, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion, 75\textsuperscript{th} Ranger
Regiment, an elite squadron of the Army, was on a routine (White) sweep and search mission in
eastern Afghanistan (Coll, “Barrage of Bullets”) when their Humvee’s fuel pump broke.
Although a helicopter flew in with a spare, it didn’t work, and they were stuck. Lieutenant David
A. Uthlaut, in charge of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Platoon and a recent graduate of West Point, hired a local “jinga
truck” to tow the Humvee so that it could get picked up by helicopter back to base. (Coll, “Barrage”) Talking to his supervisor, Company Commander William Saunders (Fish, “An Un-American Tragedy”), about the problem, Saunders ordered him to split his platoon so that half could start on the mission while the other half could deal with the broken Humvee and wait for it to be properly disposed (Coll, “Barrage of Bullets”). Although Uthlaut protested, he was overruled. Saunders himself expressed that he was under stress for the company to get on the mission from his supervisor (Coll, “Barrage of Bullets”). Pat Tillman was in Serial 1, which included Uthlaut and would proceed to the small city of Manah to carry out operations, while Serial 2 would drop off the vehicle and then would follow (Coll, “Barrage of Bullets”). Although the planned route was different than the road Serial 1 took, it became impassable, and they decided to continue on the road the first group took; there was no radio communication about this change (Coll, “Barrage of Bullets”).

Serial 2 was in a canyon, and at about 6:45 pm on April 22, 2004, small arms fire came from above. They were stuck. But the first group of soldiers, including Pat Tillman, saw the gunshot flashes and moved to take cover in an area beyond the canyon and onto the ridgeline. (Fish, “An Un-American Tragedy”) With dusk fast approaching, the groups of soldiers got confused where the bullets were coming from and began shooting. Tillman, next to an Afghan militiaman who was part of their convoy and another soldier, Bryan O’Neal, (“Pat Tillman Timeline”) climbed up a hill to increase his vision, but soldiers in Serial 2, led by Sergeant Greg Baker, mistook them as the enemy and began to fire. (Collier, “Family Demands the Truth”) During this chain of events, Uthlaut tried to radio his comrades in Serial 2 to discover where they were, but the high walls of the canyon prevented signals from penetrating (Coll, “Barrage of Bullets”). Pat Tillman at some point realized that those shooting at him were his own men, and
began to wave his arms to get their attention, eventually hitting off a smoke grenade. But bullets still poured down, and soon, Tillman was dead (Coll, “Barrage of Bullets”).

The events that followed were kept secret by the Army for a long time, and some of the details investigations were changed. What is known, according to ESPN’s “Pat Tillman Timeline”, is that he is pronounced dead at a nearby hospital, even though soldiers realized he was dead at the scene. His uniform and body armor are burned a few days later, and investigations are immediately underway as his death is announced to the media and his Silver Star recommendation is submitted.

Although death by friendly fire is not a heroic way to die—in fact, the Army considers it an embarrassment—it is a truth of war. Like other ugliers that should not be seen by the public, the Army wanted to keep it silent for fear of embarrassing themselves are exposing the chain of negligence at all levels, whether the blame is cast on Capt. Saunders for splitting the platoon or for the individual soldiers who fired too hastily (Fish, “An Un-American Tragedy”). As Tillman’s story unfolded, other events also dammed the Bush Administration. Many of the later investigative newspaper articles, including editorials, put the Tillman tragedy into its context as a way of trying to make sense of his mangled story. A week after his death, the Abu Ghraib photos were broadcast on 60 Minutes II, but he was already just another set of bad news in a line of bad news, the most of which was written in Frank Rich’s powerful editorial damming the administration for its fecklessness and its secrecy. Rich’s comments were published in November, and uses information from the big investigations done at the time, notably the San Francisco Chronicle’s article as well as those published by the Washington Post, the same articles that this paper relies on.
His column, as well as an editorial published in the *New York Times* six months later, exposed Pat Tillman’s legacy as an exercise in propaganda and public relations, damage control for a government and an Army that needed a way to spin the friendly fire death of its most famous volunteer soldier. The fact that, like most friendly fire accounts, it could have been prevented had a different series of events and chains of command taken place only added to the sense that the reasons behind his death lay buried in secrecy. Already a poster boy for heroism, it made sense to portray his death in the same light, since it naturally continued the sad story in the best possible way considering the circumstances. However, once the true nature of his story broke, his story was nonetheless “an enormous blow to the image of the Army and the Special Forces” (White), wrote the *Post* over a year after his death, when a new investigation brought his story again to the front page.

Reading the various reports on Tillman, it is clear that those in power were afraid of exposing the real truth, and even now many of the soldiers are bound not to speak to the media (Fish, “An Un-American Tragedy”). The commanding officers blame the soldiers for not being more careful on the field and for not accurately identifying those they shoot, while those on the ground blame the commanders for splitting the platoon in the first place, since it was not a good decision to do so under the circumstances. But the family is also angry that they were not notified of the truth before their son’s funeral, effectively making the spectacle a sham and sullying his name, especially for a complex man who was known for being honest. Even two and a half years later, there still continues to be questions, and records show that the Army did not follow proper procedures and a trail of evidence leaves behind inaccurate and conflicting information, as well as a record of deceit as a way to change the story to make it more palatable to the public, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. 
Conclusion

Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman were both used as symbols of patriotic American soldiers by the government at critical times during war. Both were used unwittingly for their good looks and superb stories, since they were themselves young, heroic, patriotic, and All-American, truly befitting many of the adjectives that were heaped on them and were excellent examples of the best that this country offered, unlike many public figures, young or otherwise, who usually make it in the press. Both were in difficult situations, under lots of pressure and had to make hard decisions under little light and in a small amount of time, and also dealt with failed Humvees and equipment and communication problems. The government, indeed the military, cannot afford bad press, especially in the midst of a war. The Army, which eventually dealt with criticism over the lack of preparation and adequate supplies, exploited their stories to mask these problems. Celebrity is a powerful tool, and the Army, in order to hide their own negligence and incompetence at various levels, purposely kept their stories hidden, and many of the soldiers have signed gag orders (Fish, “An Un-American Tragedy”), which means they must refuse any media requests to discuss what happened. Lynch and Tillman were perfect candidates because they were wholesome Americans, encapsulating what many want to believe are the best of the country and of its young people. They both sacrificed to fight when they did not have to, and both were scared and brave and did their best, and both suffered the consequences of an ill-prepared army and confused instructions.

In looking at these two cases, it is clear that the Army, and the government as a whole, purposely covers up and distorts facts in order to hide their own mistakes, lessening criticism of their actions. Both Lynch’s and Tillman’s stories were used as propaganda to showcase what a marvelous citizenry this country has, and were played as assets, since war tends to have a lot of
negative coverage. Although the war was just beginning when Lynch’s story hit the media, the war was not going particularly well, and when an opportunity arises, it is taken. Tillman’s story, on the other hand, was merely a continuing saga, since his enlistment into the Army in 2002 was already reported by the sports media, since it was such a novelty.

Both stories were novelties, in fact, and in wartime, positive stories need to be emphasized to take away from the harsh news and casualties of what is naturally a difficult and heartwrenching thing to cover. But the government and the Army had to distort their already heroic stories by sulling their images with lies and misinformation, which not only made the government look worse in comparison than if they had been upfront about the reality in the first place, but also made the public even more suspicious of the war and the facts they presented. Since the media tells us what is going on in the world, they have a huge responsibility to report what is happening, and must sort through competing constructions of reality and conflicting reports. Both Jessica Lynch’s and Pat Tillman’s stories remain controversial because the truth is impossible to get out in these situations, thanks to opposing, inconsistent, and contradictory reports, influenced by witnesses and government superiors who are wary of placing blame on themselves and exposing themselves in unflattering lights, causing the public to completely distrust them. The media, and indeed the government, rely on the public to believe what they are told, and a certain element of trust is necessary for this to happen. Both Jessica Lynch’s and Pat Tillman’s stories showed that the media follows the government’s line at first, but it is not until time develops for a later investigation to take place, amid dissent, for a deeper story to be told.