

GUEST ESSAY

# Donald Rumsfeld's Fog of Memos

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**By Errol Morris**

Mr. Morris is the director of a 2013 film about Donald Rumsfeld, "The Unknown Known."

Trying to understand another human being is often a dismal task. And if not dismal, thankless. What am I supposed to do? Disapprove of Donald Rumsfeld? That's easy. Perhaps too easy. He was ambitious, driven — also lucky. And, as we all know, he was one of the chief architects of the disastrous war in Iraq.

It is impossible for me to write about Mr. Rumsfeld, the former U.S. secretary of defense who died on Tuesday, without writing about his memos. He played a role in making memo-writing the new frontier in governmental accountability. He also pioneered the memo as an obfuscatory instrument. Write one memo saying one thing, write another memo saying the exact opposite.

As I interviewed Mr. Rumsfeld for my documentary about him, "The Unknown Known," it became (at least for me) a story about a man lost in his endless archive, adrift in a sea of his own verbiage.

In 1966, early in his public service career, Representative Rumsfeld, Republican of Illinois, co-sponsored the Freedom of Information Act, a vehicle for understanding the intentions of high political figures. Then, as a member of President Gerald Ford's administration — first as the president's chief of staff, then as secretary of defense — he found a way to effectively undermine it.

President Richard Nixon was undone by his attempts to conceal and excise the official record. Mr. Rumsfeld knew better by the time he was serving under Mr. Nixon's successor. The trick was to marginalize the record, to litter it with so many contradictions that a rebuttal to any future historian could always be found. His memos (known as "yellow perils" in the Nixon administration and "snowflakes" under Ford) would pile up in drifts, disguising the underlying historical landscape. It's a level of genius that has not been acknowledged in the press — the founder of the Freedom of Information Act is the guy who figured out how to render it almost totally worthless.

And what accounts for his seeming change of heart? The metamorphosis from a liberal Rockefeller Republican congressman, a confidant of the civil rights and antiwar activist Allard Lowenstein, to one of the most reviled neoconservatives?

It's easy to blame everything on opportunism, a swiftly changing environment of success and more success. Vocational greed ... I don't know. But whatever the reason, a new Donald Rumsfeld emerged during the Ford administration.

His first stint as secretary of defense is the start of the story — Team B, in particular. That was an exercise in which a dozen or so defense industry wonks and Russia hawks were given carte blanche to undermine and effectively rewrite the latest National Intelligence Estimate on the Soviet Union, which they argued didn't reflect the true peril facing America. They called it a “competitive stress assessment” — more confusing verbiage.

How does it work? Put simply, you have a body of evidence. You don't trust it. Or maybe you don't like it. It conflicts with other beliefs you have. So you create another body of evidence, supporting your alternative view. I'm tempted to say, an alternative view of the facts. But just what the facts are is exactly what comes into question.

I think of Mr. Rumsfeld as the epistemologist from hell. What are the grounds for rational belief? As often as not, the goal for Mr. Rumsfeld was not justifying belief but undermining it. For example, many people believed in the possibility of détente. Team B aimed to show that belief was stupid, or at best misplaced.

When you set up a group of people to look for evidence to justify a prior conclusion, you have opened the proverbial can of worms. It's not hard to see Team B as a precursor to the Office of Special Plans — the ad hoc group within the Department of Defense that gave us much of the “intelligence” that led the United States to war with Iraq. And arguably there's a progression from there to the current-day justifications for re-examining the 2020 election.

The charitable explanation is “reasoning backward,” from consequent to antecedent — affirming the consequent. That's just a logical fallacy. The less charitable version is reasoning without reason. While I was making my documentary film about Robert McNamara, “The Fog of War,” I remember being shocked by his dire assessment of Vietnam: Reason will not save us. Alas, it seems clear that lack of reason will not save us either.

Nothing could be more frightening than the appearance of thought floating over the surface of things — unknown knowns and the like — masking an underlying absence of anything. This is what Mr. Rumsfeld ultimately excelled at.

George Packer recently called Mr. Rumsfeld America's worst secretary of defense. But this isn't a popularity contest. It's not the man so much as the methodology. And the methodology, alas, seems ubiquitous. It's not just him. It's all of us.

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