

Truth and the Closed Mind: My Encounter with Rumsfeld

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Hold 'em, Yale" is one of the best short stories of *Guys and Dolls* creator Damon Runyon, who depicted the New York City underworld in the 1920s. The story deals with an undercover operation to scalp ducats before the annual Yale-Harvard football game. It begins:

"What I am doing in New Haven on the day of a very large football game between the Harvards and the Yales is something calling for no little explanation, for I am not such a guy as you are likely to find in New Haven at any time—and especially not on the day of a large football game."

A variant came to mind Thursday as I walked through a posh Atlanta neighborhood to the Southern Center for International Policy to hear a speech by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

"What I am doing in Atlanta on the day of a very large lecture by Donald Rumsfeld to an establishment audience is something calling for no little explanation, for I am not such a guy as you are likely to find in such a venue at any time—and especially not when the ducat requires \$40 up front."

But serendipity prevailed. The ACLU of Georgia had invited me to their annual dinner on Thursday, May 4, to receive the National Civil Liberties Award. Friends in Atlanta arranged for me to bookend my remarks at the ACLU dinner with a Wednesday presentation to Pax Christi, the Catholic peace movement, and a talk on Friday evening at Quaker House in Decatur. I planned to put the rationale for looming war with Iran in context by drawing an unhappy but direct parallel with the bogus reasons adduced to "justify" the U.S. attack on Iraq more than three years ago.

When those friends learned last Monday that Rumsfeld would be in Atlanta Thursday to give an afternoon speech at the Center, it seemed a natural to go. The event was said to be open to the public, but it took tradecraft skills assimilated over a 27-year career with the CIA to acquire a ticket. (The event was strangely absent from the Center's Web site, reportedly at the insistence of the Defense Department.)

The fact that my presence there was pure coincidence turned out to be a huge disappointment for those who began interviews later that day by insisting I tell them why I had stalked Rumsfeld all the way from Washington to Atlanta. Especially people like Paula Zahn, who asked me on Thursday evening "what kind of ax" I had to grind with him.

To prepare for my presentations, I took along a briefcase full of notes and clippings, one of which was a *New York Times* article datelined Atlanta, Sept. 27, 2002, quoting Rumsfeld's assertion that there was "bulletproof" evidence of ties between al-Qaeda and the government of Saddam Hussein.

This was the kind of unfounded allegation that, at the time, deceived 69 percent of Americans into believing that the Iraqi leader played a role in the tragedy of 9/11. Rumsfeld's "bulletproof" rhetoric also came in the wake of an intensive but quixotic search by my former colleagues at the CIA for any reliable evidence of such ties.

A fresh reminder of the Bush administration's Iraq deceptions surfaced Thursday morning, when the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* published an interview with Paul Pillar, the senior U.S. intelligence specialist on the Middle East and terrorism until he retired late last year. Pillar branded administration attempts to prove a link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein "an organized campaign of manipulation I suppose by some definitions that could be called a lie."

I arrived at the Rumsfeld lecture early, took a seat near a microphone set aside for Q-and-A, and thought I might ask Rumsfeld to explain his use of the "bulletproof" adjective, which came at a time when none other than Gen. Brent Scowcroft was describing such evidence as "scant," and the CIA was saying it was nonexistent. (The 9/11 commission later ruled definitively in CIA's favor.)

Rumsfeld brought up *bête noire* terrorist Zarqawi as proof of collaboration between al-Qaeda and Iraq, but that was a canard easily knocked down. It appears that Rumsfeld thinks no one really pays attention. Sadly, as regards the mainstream press, he has been largely right—at least until now.

When Rumsfeld broadened our dialogue to include the never-to-be-found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, saying, "Apparently, there were no weapons of mass destruction," I could not resist reminding him that he had claimed he actually knew where they were. Anyone who followed this issue closely would remember his remark to George Stephanopoulos on March 30, 2003:

"We know where they are. They're in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad and east, west, south, and north somewhat."

As soon as the event was over, CNN asked me for my sources, which I was happy to share. The CNN folks seemed a bit surprised that they all checked out. To their credit, they overcame the more customary "McGovern said this, but Rumsfeld said that"—and the dismissive "well, we'll have to leave it there"—kind of treatment. In Rumsfeldian parlance, what I had said turned out to be "known knows," even though he provided an altered version on Thursday of his "we know where they are." Better still, in its coverage, CNN quoted what Rumsfeld had said in 2003.

That evening a friend e-mailed me about a call she got from a close associate in "upper management at CNN" to ask about me. She quoted the CNN manager: "We checked and double-checked everything this guy had to say, and he was 100 percent accurate." He then asked if those protesting the war "were getting organized or something." She responded,

“Indeed we are and have been for some time, and it’s about time the mainstream media caught up.”

With the exception of CNN-and MSNBC which also did its homework and displayed the tangled web woven by the normally articulate defense secretary-the other networks generally limited their coverage to the “he-said-but-he-said” coverage more typical of what passes for journalism these days. Even CNN found it *de rigueur* to put neocon ideologue Frank Gaffney on with me for Wolf Blitzer. Gaffney is well to the right of Rumsfeld, so I should not have been surprised to hear Gaffney take the line that the U.S. may still find evidence of ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda, and of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Hope springs eternal.

And there were more subliminal messages. In some press reports I was described as a “Rumsfeld critic” and “heckler” who was, heavens, “rude to Rumsfeld.” Other accounts referred to my “alleged” service with the CIA, which prompted my wife to question-I think in jest-what I was really doing for those 27 years. I believe I was able to convince her without her performing additional fact-checking.

All in all, my encounter with Rumsfeld was for me a highly instructive experience. The Center’s president, Peter White, singled out Rumsfeld’s “honesty” in introducing him, and 99 percent of those attending seemed primed to agree. Indeed, their reaction brought to mind film footage of rallies in Germany during the ’30s. When Rumsfeld replied to my first question about his false statements on Iraq ‘s WMD, the applause was automatic. “I did not lie then,” he insisted.

This was immediately greeted with what *Pravda* used to describe as “stormy applause,” followed immediately by rather unseemly shouts by this otherwise well-disciplined and well-heeled group to have me summarily thrown out. At the end, as we all filed out slowly, I could make eye contact with only one person-who proceeded to berate me for being insubordinate.

Scary. No open minds there. A graphic reminder for those wishing to spread some truth around that we have our work cut out for us. We have to find imaginative ways to use truth as a lever to pry open closed minds.

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