

# The New York Times

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## The Opinion Pages

ERROL MORRIS

# The Certainty of Donald Rumsfeld (Part 1)

By Errol Morris March 25, 2014 9:00 pm

Errol Morris on photography.

*Read Part 2; Part 3; Part 4.*

### 1.

#### THREE REPORTERS

Four kinds of persons: zeal without knowledge; knowledge without zeal; neither knowledge nor zeal; both zeal and knowledge.

– Pascal, *Pensées*

When I first met Donald Rumsfeld in his offices in Washington, D.C., one of the things I said to him was that if we could provide an answer to the American public about why we went to war in Iraq, we would be rendering an important service. He agreed. Unfortunately, after having spent 33 hours over the course of a year interviewing Mr. Rumsfeld, I fear I know less about the origins of the Iraq war than when I started. A question presents itself: How could that be? How could I know *less* rather than more? Was he hiding something? Or was there really little more than met the eye?

Many people associate the phrases the *known known*, the *known unknown* and the *unknown unknown* with Rumsfeld, but few people are aware of how he first presented these ideas to the public. It was at a Pentagon news conference on Feb. 12,

2002. Reporters filed in to the Pentagon Briefing Room — five months after 9/11 and a year before the invasion of Iraq. The verbal exchanges that followed provide an excursion into a world no less irrational, no less absurd, than the worlds Lewis Carroll created in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Jack McWethy, the ABC Pentagon correspondent, asked Rumsfeld about the containment policies of the Clinton administration.[1]

The substance of Rumsfeld's reply reiterated his previous condemnations of those policies — sanctions aren't working, the no-fly zones produce little or no benefit, and Saddam is developing weapons of mass destruction.[2] It was also a warning:

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** Every year that goes by and the inspectors are not there, the development of their weapons of mass destruction proceed apace, bringing them closer to a time when they will have those weapons developed in a form that is more threatening than it had been the year before or the year before that.

Jim Miklaszewski, the NBC Pentagon correspondent, asked another question.

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** In regard to Iraq weapons of mass destruction and terrorists, is there any evidence to indicate that Iraq has attempted to or is willing to supply terrorists with weapons of mass destruction? Because there are reports that there is no evidence of a direct link between Baghdad and some of these terrorist organizations.

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones. And so people who have the omniscience that they can say with high certainty that something has not happened or is not being tried, have capabilities that

are — what was the word you used, Pam, earlier?

**PAM HESS:** Free associate.[3] [The phrase “free associate” came earlier in the press conference in response to a question about drones.]

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** Yeah. They can do things I can’t do.  
(laughter)

Few people today remember that Rumsfeld was ostensibly responding to Miklaszewski’s request for *evidence*. What *evidence* do you have that Iraq is supplying terrorists with W.M.D.? Rumsfeld’s answer was a non-answer — not just an evasion or a misdirection. Many people believe Rumsfeld’s reply was brilliant. I think otherwise.

Miklaszewski was unsatisfied and was trying to pin him down. I sense his frustration. I share it. What is he saying? Miklaszewski continued:

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** Excuse me. But is this an unknown unknown?

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** I’m not —

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** Because you said several unknowns, and I’m just wondering if this is an unknown unknown.

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** I’m not going to say which it is.

Jamie McIntyre, the senior Pentagon correspondent for CNN, returned to the real question — the question of *evidence*.

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** I just want to — because you so cleverly buried Jim Miklaszewski’s question by characterizing it as something that was unknowable. But he didn’t ask you [about] something that was unknowable.

He asked you if you knew of evidence that Iraq was supplying — or willing to supply weapons of mass destruction to terrorists —

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** He cited reports where people said that was not the case.

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** Right. He's done that and —

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** And my response was to that, and I thought it was good response.

But McIntyre did not give up. And Rumsfeld slipped into more gobbledygook.

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** But if we are to believe things —

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** I could have said that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, or vice versa.

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** But we just want to know, are you aware of any evidence? Because that would increase our level of belief from faith to something that would be based on evidence.

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** Yeah, I am aware of a lot of evidence involving Iraq on a lot of subjects. And it is not for me to make public judgments about my assessment or others' assessment of that evidence. I'm going to make that the last question.

The power of dogma versus evidence. We have been transported back to 1633. To Galileo Galilei standing before the Inquisition disputing the geocentric versus the heliocentric solar system. For the Inquisition, Galileo's calculations conflict with dogma. But for Galileo, his calculations reveal the true nature of the universe — the *true nature of reality*. (The scene is memorialized in a painting by Joseph-Nicolas

Robert-Fleury, *Galileo Galilei Before Members of the Holy Office in the Vatican in 1633* — a painting of a painting with *Raphael's Disputation of the Holy Sacrament* looming in the background.)

These 17th century debates remind us that if you have an unshakable belief in something, then no amount of evidence (or lack of evidence) can convince you otherwise. (There are always anti-rationalist objections to everything and anything. It is curious, however, to hear them in the 21st century rather than in the 17th.)

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Jim Miklaszewski (NBC Pentagon correspondent), Pam Hess (former U.P.I. Pentagon correspondent) and Jamie McIntyre (former CNN Pentagon correspondent, now at NPR) were three of the reporters who questioned Rumsfeld in that exchange on Feb. 12, and I decided to interview each one of them. They were hearing about the “known” and the “unknown” for the first time. What did they make of it? I wanted to interview people who may have shared my frustrations with the answers that Rumsfeld offered to questions about evidence.

Pam Hess was my favorite. She worked for U.P.I. and A.P. and is now the executive director of Arcadia, a center for sustainable food and agriculture.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Rumsfeld clearly liked you.

**PAM HESS:** Yes, I think that's true. He liked Mik [Jim Miklaszewski] and Jamie [McIntyre], as well. He liked a lot of the reporters. That was my impression. As the Secretary of Defense, he had so much power, and was obviously so confident, which you could also characterize in other ways —

**ERROL MORRIS:** In what other ways would you characterize it?

**PAM HESS:** *[Laughs]* Some people would call him arrogant. I just found him to be his own version of “extremely confident.” And I think he appreciated reporters because we didn't have to kowtow to him. He enjoyed that he was finally in a place where people were saying what they thought.

My impression was that he enjoyed the press conferences because he sort of got to bare-knuckle it.

**ERROL MORRIS:** He also got to perform.

**PAM HESS:** And he loved it. He's an eminently confident person and therefore does not shy away from being the center of attention.

**ERROL MORRIS:** He might have liked to be confronted, but it's not at all clear to me that he was responsive to the questions. Before he gave the "known and unknown" speech, Jim Miklaszewski asked, pointedly, "What *evidence* do you have that Saddam Hussein is providing W.M.D. to Al Qaeda?"

**PAM HESS:** The problem you have as a reporter is that you need facts. To really chase that rabbit down the hole — to take it apart — you needed more information than we had. We didn't *know* that there were no weapons of mass destruction.

**ERROL MORRIS:** But you certainly you had suspicions —

**PAM HESS:** [The administration] may well have all believed that there were W.M.D. But honestly, if they went there and found nothing, how do you make a case for war? When Rumsfeld was selected as Secretary of Defense, that group of people came in with him — Feith and Wolfowitz and all the rest. Reporters would just look at their résumés and where they were coming from — and this was well before 9/11 — we were like, "How long before this war with Iraq starts?"[4]

**ERROL MORRIS:** Did it seem like an inevitability?

**PAM HESS:** It was a difficult environment to report in. The anti-war crowd really wanted the reporters in that room to take up their fight. And

that is something that we couldn't do, professionally or ethically. We're not there as antiwar protesters. We're there as reporters, trying to assemble a public record. You had to have all your ducks in a row to ask a question and to be able to keep pursuing it, because he would find any weakness and take it apart. I thought of them as exit ramps. I tried not to give him exit ramps in my questions.

**ERROL MORRIS:** You were good at your job. You asked thought-provoking questions. You confronted him repeatedly.

**PAM HESS:** It was an intimidating room to be in sometimes.

**ERROL MORRIS:** You said that you were always looking for what would be his possible exit ramps? Could you give me an example?

**PAM HESS:** The “unknown unknown” is a perfect exit ramp. [Miklaszewski's questions about evidence were never answered.] I remember a reporter asked a question that began, “It is said that ... x.” And Rumsfeld pounced on the “It is said” part: “Who says that?” If there were any adjectives or adverbs that he could quarrel with, he would. Those were the exit ramps. I learned and others learned not to go in unprepared. You had to put together a question without exit ramps — that is, direct and short and getting exactly to what you want to know. And whether or not he answered it is another question. But at least you have a clear question on the record, and then you can judge his answer. I don't mean this as an insult to him — but I think that there's less there than people imagine. He's who he is, and that's it. That guy that you captured on film, that's who he is exactly. And I think that freaks people out. Because he doesn't have these layers of insecurity and self-doubt. He just doesn't.

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In 2003, Jamie McIntyre was the senior Pentagon correspondent at CNN. Now, he is a familiar voice on NPR's *All Things Considered*. When I called him, he

compared Rumsfeld, the subject of my current film, *The Unknown Known*, and Robert S. McNamara, the subject of an earlier film, *The Fog of War*. He told me about a trip he had taken with Rumsfeld. *Fog* served as inflight entertainment. Did Rumsfeld watch? Was he struck by any similarities? Jamie McIntyre asked him, but his question was quickly dismissed: “No, no, I wasn’t watching ... If I have time I’ll watch it.” The story resonated with me. On our first meeting, I’d asked Rumsfeld if he had ever seen *The Fog of War* — I had actually sent him a copy. But it was never clear to me whether he had watched it. Notwithstanding, he told me, “that man [McNamara] had nothing to apologize for.”

**ERROL MORRIS:** I hadn’t realized that Rumsfeld’s recitation of the known and unknown was a response to a question by Jim Miklaszewski about evidence. It was a very, very specific question. And the answer is this evasion —

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** Pentagon reporters don’t really expect to get much information from briefings. The real reporting at the Pentagon is based on sources and relationships that you have with people — digging out the things that the Pentagon doesn’t want to say. So the briefings are a place where you can get people to put stuff on the record, and you can be on record asking tough questions. Reporters are trying to demonstrate that they’re independent, that they’re asking the tough questions, that they’re not cowed or intimidated by these officials.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Still things do come out of press conferences. Do you remember *that* press conference? The known and the unknown?

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** When he said it, I remember thinking, “Yeah, that’s true. It’s sort of self-evident, but it’s true: the things that we know, and the things that we don’t know, and the things we don’t know we don’t know.” After that, I remember some people were portraying it as some sort of *gaffe* — some bit of nonsense he had said that was convoluted and didn’t make any sense. Bob Gates, who came after Rumsfeld, had his own version of this

thing. He came from an intelligence background, and he used to talk about the difference between “secrets” and “mysteries” — secrets being things that were knowable but we just don’t know them, and mysteries being things that are basically unknowable — as the difficulty that policy-makers have in making decisions about things because of the information they don’t have, the imponderables.

**ERROL MORRIS:** I sometimes think of it as the epistemology from hell: the known known, the known unknown —

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** What you see in Rumsfeld is based on how you feel about him. I actually liked him a lot. There’s a tendency to really demonize him, or, for the few people that really love Rumsfeld, to lionize him.

**ERROL MORRIS:** I was often struck by the difference between Rumsfeld and Robert McNamara. McNamara said that he never answered the question he was asked but rather the question that he wanted to be asked. Rumsfeld, on the other hand, would never answer the question he was asked or any other question — Ask Rumsfeld a question, and all you get is evasions. But are they just evasions or do they reveal a lack of substance? And McNamara expressed regret —

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** I know Rumsfeld well enough at this point to know that he’s never going to have this kind of epiphany. He’s never going to have this introspective moment where he realizes, even though we had the best intentions, that many of his decisions turned out to be disasters. It was rare that he would ever admit that he was wrong about anything. Part of his defense was that he was very adept at putting caveats into everything that he said so that he could go back later and cite the caveat. “I never said how long the war would last.” “I never said how many troops would be needed.” “I never said how much it would cost.” He was very slippery. You couldn’t pin him down on things. And his favorite technique, of course, was to challenge

the premise of your question and never actually answer it.[5]

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Jim Miklaszewski has been the chief Pentagon correspondent at NBC for over 20 years. He's still there.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Everybody knows about the known known, the known unknown, etc. But the first time Rumsfeld publicly mentioned it was in response to a question you asked — “What evidence do you have that Saddam is giving W.M.D. to terrorist organizations?”

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** There were many people within the U.S. military asking the same questions internally — “Have you seen or heard anything about the existence of W.M.D.s?” Which was a strong indication that many people within the senior military ranks were not convinced.

**ERROL MORRIS:** I think it's amazing that people in the military were asking *you* for information about W.M.D. But you never really got a reply —

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** I mean, what do you do at a press conference? I thought I had challenged him about as far as he was going to let me go. Not that I needed his permission. But it was clear that he was not going to answer it beyond that, at that point ... Whenever we go to these briefings and we question anybody — and particularly the secretary of defense — we're not looking for opinions, we're not looking for political spin. We're just looking for facts. That's what drives this press corps, covering the military in particular: “Just give us the facts and let us report them.”

**ERROL MORRIS:** You have a look on your face — maybe this is just my interpreting it — a look of bemusement.

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** Oh, no. Most good reporters are, in a sense,

like lawyers — you ask a question, having a sense of what the answer, or at least part of the answer, is going to be. But with Rumsfeld, that really was never the case.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Could you see the war coming? Did it seem like the die was cast already in early 2002?

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** Well, I think the die was cast not only concerning weapons of mass destruction, but concerning the invasion and the immediate aftermath. For months after the Iraq war began, many — not just in the Pentagon but in the administration — failed to recognize that while the invasion was a success, the steps that the U.S. had taken immediately following the invasion were crumbling before their eyes: the de-Baathification, the disarming and dissolution of the entire military. This was something that Rumsfeld used to talk about, too, in the days after Baghdad fell. He was very dismissive of the fact that the looting [in 2003] signified anything except a brief period of lawlessness. But, again, I harken back to some of the military leaders who saw that, and immediately recognized that there was no structure left there, which did not bode well for the immediate, if not the distant, future security of Baghdad or of the entire country.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Do you think that Rumsfeld was in denial? That even he couldn't see his way to the facts through the layers of fantasy that he constructed in promoting the Iraq war?

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** Well, not just him but the entire building was in denial. Doug Feith — don't get me started on Doug Feith — told me that they had a Marshall Plan all set to go in terms of rebuilding Iraq. And he pointed to this stack of huge three-ringed binders, all of them black. There must have been about 10 of them stacked up on top of a cabinet. And I asked to see them, and he said, "No, you can't. It's classified." And I said, "Well, O.K., I understand that, I guess." But I raised it to somebody else within the

next couple of weeks. I said, “Well, Doug Feith showed me the Marshall Plan for Iraq.” And this person laughed, and he said, “Mik, that was the Marshall Plan.” It was a copy of the original Marshall Plan, not a plan for Iraq.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Was Feith responsible for these, the two edicts that came out of Bremer — the de-Baathification edict, the disbanding of the military?[6]

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** Well, no, because Rumsfeld would not have delegated that kind of authority or power to Feith, either. There were certain people that you could tell he would listen to intently, but it always looked to me, whenever Feith came around, it was, Rumsfeld was just very dismissive. He’d say, “O.K., well” — and then sort of shoo him away.

**ERROL MORRIS:** So who did Donald Rumsfeld listen to?

**JIM MIKLASZEWSKI:** Donald Rumsfeld.

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A couple of months after our discussion I received an email from Pam Hess. She had written down some notes, and finally decided to send them to me. She described these thoughts as “the mice running around in her brain opening up old doors.”

With regard to your central question: was it frustrating to cover Rumsfeld? The answer is no, mostly. I saw who he was pretty clearly and I didn’t expect to get much out of him — at least nothing he didn’t want to share — so I usually wasn’t frustrated. He met my expectations.

And to say it was frustrating would suggest that I thought I “knew” the truth and just couldn’t get him to admit it.

But the fact is, I didn’t know what was true regarding the intelligence —

none of us did. So I tried to nibble around the edges of what was knowable. If I couldn't see and judge the value of the intelligence for myself, I could at least try to figure out his decision process, what his thinking was, why he felt so clearly and strongly that war with Iraq was the right way to go — regardless of what the intel said — and try to capture that for the record. I was very curious about the narrative he was building. The “why” interested me more than the “what.”

A good way to describe the situation in that press room in the lead-up to the war was that the administration had this black box of intelligence, its contents known only to them. We were basically asking 20 questions about what was in the box. But without getting a peek at it ourselves, we were not in a strong position to challenge them factually — which is ultimately our only real power ...

So I'd turn over everything he said in my head, try to square it up with everything we knew, and argue it out to myself from his perspective. And many times I'd hit a brick wall — I just couldn't make sense of what I thought I knew to be true from what he said. And then my hand would shoot up involuntarily. I have seen tape of it actually happening. My brow gets knitted, I cock my head, then up goes the arm.

His confrontational style encouraged me to have my facts down cold before I went in there. He'd destroy you if there was a weakness in your question, and you'd end up giving him the exit ramp he was looking for to get out of a difficult question while scoring points with his sizable fan base on TV.

I don't think anyone could ever get him to admit regret or question his past actions. It's not in his DNA, and I don't think he feels regret for anything. This is a supremely self-assured person who believes he makes the best decisions possible given the information and the situation at hand, and then lets the chips fall where they may.

Critics attacked us because they thought they could do our job better — that if they had the opportunity to interrogate Rumsfeld, by golly they'd break him and get the truth!

Never gonna happen. He is, I believe, exactly who he presents to the world.

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[1] McWethy died in a skiing accident shortly after he retired from ABC News. This was his question:

**JACK McWETHY:** Previous administrations have adopted the policy of trying to contain Saddam Hussein. And it appears from what the president has said and what Colin Powell has said that containment no longer works in the view of this administration, that the threat has somehow changed, increased, that the dynamics are different, and therefore regime change has become a more substantial goal for this administration than previous ones. Is that true?

[2] These assessments appear in a Rumsfeld memo from July 27, 2001, over a month before 9/11. If Clinton's policy was containment, the policy of the new administration was regime change.

[3] Pam Hess, earlier in the news conference, had asked Rumsfeld and Richard Myers (the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs) about drones and their use by the C.I.A.

**PAM HESS:** Could I just get the two of you [Rumsfeld and Myers] maybe to free associate a little bit more on that subject? We're seeing a —

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** To do what? (laughter)

**PAM HESS:** Free associate. (laughs) It's a sort of touchy-feely '70s

term. (laughter)

**RICHARD MYERS:** I don't believe I can —

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** You got the — you got the wrong guys!  
(laughter)

**RICHARD MYERS:** I don't think I can do that with you. It's illegal.  
(laughter)

[4] Doug Feith got his start in government in 1981 working for the National Security Council under his college mentor Richard Pipes, who headed up the Team B study challenging C.I.A. estimates of Soviet missile deployment. The next year, he went to the Defense Department to serve as Special Counsel to assistant secretary Richard Perle, neoconservative godfather. In the following years, Feith was influential in blocking ratification of changes to the Geneva Conventions that grant non-state actors prisoner of war status even if they fail to distinguish themselves from the civilian population. Under the Bush administration, he was the number three man at the Pentagon, overseeing the Counter Terrorism Evaluation Unit, which sought and publicized links between terror organizations and state sponsors, and the Office of Special Plans, tasked with postwar planning in Iraq.

Paul Wolfowitz also rose to prominence through his involvement with Team B, though he previously got his start in Washington as an aide to influential Senator Henry M. Jackson. Under Reagan, Wolfowitz became Director of Policy Planning at the Department of State and began at this point denouncing Saddam Hussein. He served as Undersecretary of Defense for Policy from 1989 to 1993 under then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, and was the author of the policy that became known as the Wolfowitz Doctrine, promoting unilateralism and pre-emptive military action against potential threats. He repeatedly expressed his regret that Saddam Hussein was not ousted in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Prior to George W. Bush's election in 2000, Wolfowitz was one of the first members of a group of political heavyweights called The Vulcans, who were assembled to advise and coach the future president.

[5] From the April 9, 2003, defense briefing (<http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2339>; video here: <http://c-spanvideo.org/clip/4471808>):

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** Mr. Secretary, here's a single question that hopefully doesn't lend itself to a one-word answer. (Scattered laughter.) What about Saddam Hussein? (Scattered laughter.)

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** (Sighs.) Exactly what is it about him that you're interested in? (Laughter.) His health?

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** Where is he? Do you know where he is? Are you trying to get him? Is he likely to get away? Does it –

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** There's no question but that — it is hard to find a single person. It is hard to find them when they're alive and mobile, it's hard to find them when they're not well, and it's hard to find them if they're buried under rubble. We don't know. And he's not been around. He's not active. Therefore, he's either dead or he's incapacitated, or he's healthy and cowering in some tunnel someplace, trying to avoid being caught. What else can one say?

**JAMIE McINTYRE:** Will you get him?

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** Who knows? Who knows? Time will tell. The important things that needed to happen will happen. The regime will change, and the country will no longer have weapons of mass destruction. It will no longer threaten its neighbors. It will have an opportunity for the people of Iraq to participate in determining what kind of a government they want. And liberated people will be able to be free to say what they want and do what they want. They might even have a free press eventually there.

[6] L. Paul “Jerry” Bremer was installed as head of the Coalition Provisional

Authority for Iraq in charge of reconstruction in May of 2003. In this role, Bremer was permitted to make rules by decree. Many people believe that his first two decrees, made in late May, were responsible for plunging Iraq into chaos and fueling the insurgency. Although there's little disagreement about the effect of these decrees, there's considerably more about whether they originated with Bremer, or, if not, where they came from. It seems unlikely that policy decisions of this magnitude would have been made without oversight from the Pentagon, the State Department or the White House.

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ERROL MORRIS

# The Certainty of Donald Rumsfeld (Part 2)

By Errol Morris March 26, 2014 8:00 pm

Errol Morris on photography.

*Read Part 1; Part 3; Part 4.*

## 2.

### THE KNOWN AND THE UNKNOWN

The phrase “known unknown” first appears in early 19th-century Romantic poetry — in John Keats’s *Endymion*, his ode to the sovereign power of love.[1] Fifty years later it appears again in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*.<sup>[2]</sup> A metaphor for the unknowability of the mind of man. And then John Wesley Powell, the one-armed Civil War veteran who traveled through the Grand Canyon, compared the unknown known and the known unknown. Savagery versus civilization — the first use I can document of the two phrases in one sentence.<sup>[3]</sup> Powell wrote:

There is an unknown known, and there is a known unknown. The unknown known is the philosophy of savagery; the known unknown is the philosophy of civilization. In those stages of culture that we call savagery and barbarism, all things are known — supposed to be known; but when at last something is known, understood, explained, then to those who have that knowledge in full comprehension all other things become unknown. Then is ushered in the era of investigation and discovery; then science is born; then is the beginning of civilization. The philosophy of savagery is complete; the philosophy of civilization fragmentary. Ye men of science, ye wise fools, ye have discovered the law of gravity, but ye cannot tell what gravity is. But savagery has a cause and a method for all things; nothing is left

unexplained.[4]

In short, the savage is *free* to imagine anything; the civilized man is constrained by evidence. The *known unknown* “usher[s] in the era of investigation and discovery;” the *unknown known* is the savage’s false belief that he can explain everything.

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Rumsfeld, in his memoir, *Known and Unknown*, says he learned about the known and unknown from William R. Graham, who served with him in the late 1990s on the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission — an attempt to undermine or at least question the C.I.A. assessment asserting the improbability of a ballistic missile attack since the fall of the Soviet Union.[5] (For years Rumsfeld had proposed “defensive” missiles as a shield against offensive missiles — in my opinion, setting off yet another arms race. On my visit to his offices in Washington, Rumsfeld went into a closet and pulled out a heavy, crumpled piece of metal — part of a deployed antiballistic missile. It was his trump card: “Who says you can’t shoot down a missile with a missile?”)

The known known, the known unknown and the unknown unknown seemingly have straightforward interpretations. Or do they? Things we know we know — like the name of the president of the United States or the capital of France. And things we know we don’t know — like the exact population of Kathmandu. (I know I don’t know it.) Things we know we don’t know but we can look them up, say on Wikipedia. Like the atomic number of tungsten. (It’s 74. I just looked it up.) Or things that we know we don’t know but need to be investigated. (Who killed JonBenét Ramsey? I don’t know, but someone probably does know — the killer? — although I know I don’t know who that person is.) Things that our enemies know but may not be known to us. (How many atomic warheads are there in North Korea?) And then, of course, there are the things I once knew but can’t remember. It goes on and on and on. It begs us to answer the question what does it mean to *know* something? Or to *know* that we *know* something? Or to *know* that we don’t *know* something? Doesn’t it depend on *evidence*?[6]

As Rumsfeld tells the story, the known and unknown are linked (see also the aforementioned Feb. 12 news conference) with the *absence* not the *presence* of evidence. Rumsfeld writes in his memoir:

The idea of known and unknown unknowns recognizes that the information those in positions of responsibility in government, as well as in other human endeavors, have at their disposal is almost always incomplete. It emphasizes the importance of intellectual humility, a valuable attribute in decision making and in formulating strategy. It is difficult to accept — to know — that there may be important unknowns. The best strategists try to imagine and consider the possible, even if it seems unlikely. They are then more likely to be prepared and agile enough to adjust course if and when new and surprising information requires it — when things that were previously unknown become known.

I also encountered this concept in Thomas Schelling's foreword to Roberta Wohlstetter's book *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, in which Schelling identified a "poverty of expectations" as the primary explanation for America's inability to anticipate and thwart the Japanese attack on Hawaii. Schelling's message was as clear as it was prescient: We needed to prepare for the likelihood that we would be attacked by an unanticipated foe in ways that we might not imagine.[7]

Let's examine this passage.

As Rumsfeld writes, the known and unknown recognizes that information is always incomplete. Correct as far as it goes. Information is always incomplete — do we ever have all the evidence we want or need? Of course not. But was the threat of the Japanese in 1941 or Al Qaeda in 2001 an unknown unknown or even a known unknown? Evidence was ignored or underestimated — in 1941 and 2001 — not because it was "unknown," but because it didn't fit a preconceived agenda.

Both Roberta Wohlstetter and Thomas Schelling, writing for publication in the early 1960s, were concerned with the possibility of a nuclear war — how to prevent it. Wohlstetter's book ends with an admonition, not a solution:

We cannot *count* on strategic warning. We *might* get it, and we might be able to take useful preparatory actions that would be impossible without it. We certainly ought to plan to exploit such a possibility should it occur. However, since we cannot rely on strategic warning, our defenses, if we are to have confidence in them, must be designed to function without it. If we accept the fact that the signal picture for impending attacks is almost sure to be ambiguous, we shall prearrange actions that are right and feasible in response to ambiguous signals, including signs of an attack that might be false. We must be capable of reacting repeatedly to false alarms without committing ourselves or the enemy to wage thermonuclear war .... We have to accept the fact of uncertainty and learn to live with it. No magic, in code or otherwise, will provide certainty. Our plans must work without it.[8]

Schelling's foreword, likewise, spells out the ways in which intelligence can fail despite our best efforts — not because we don't know about it, but because we fail to interpret it correctly or to act on it. As Schelling puts it, "There is a tendency in our planning to confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable." But this is *not* an invitation to imagine the worst and to act on it.

Call this the Chicken Little Principle. Do you remember Chicken Little? An acorn falls on Chicken Little's head, and she decides the sky is falling. Other animals are warned in turn — Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, Goosey Loosey, Turkey Lurkey — until they are all eaten in their panic by Foxy Loxy, who sees an unparalleled gustatory opportunity. There are a number of staggering what-ifs. What if Chicken Little had asked for *additional* evidence that the sky was falling? What if Henny Penny or Goosey Loosey had been more skeptical of Chicken Little's claims? You can't fault Chicken Little for a lack of imagination, but the fable is a warning against unfettered credulity — and imagination. If Chicken Little had reacted to the falling acorn with greater equanimity, she might still be alive today — along with many, if not all of her barnyard friends.

Remarkably, the Chicken Little imagery comes from Rumsfeld himself, not just from me. For years he had been Mr. Naysayer — second-guessing the C.I.A., predicting Soviet nuclear dominance, attacking détente, proposing antiballistic

missile shields, conjuring images of a Saddam armed with nuclear weapons and an assortment of biological and chemical W.M.D. He was the boy who cried “Armageddon.” Now, the shoe was on the other foot. In a Pentagon news conference on April 11, 2003, a few weeks before victory in Iraq was declared — somewhat prematurely, I should add — Rumsfeld responded to reports of looting and anarchy by accusing his critics of being — guess what? — naysayers.

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** Let me say one other thing. The images you are seeing on television you are seeing over, and over, and over, and it’s the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase, and you see it 20 times, and you think, “My goodness, were there that many vases?” (Laughter.) “Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?”

**CHARLES ALDINGER:** Do you think that the words “anarchy” and “lawlessness” are ill-chosen —

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** Absolutely. I picked up a newspaper today and I couldn’t believe it. I read eight headlines that talked about chaos, violence, unrest. And it just was Henny Penny — “The sky is falling.” I’ve never seen anything like it! And here is a country that’s being liberated, here are people who are going from being repressed and held under the thumb of a vicious dictator, and they’re free. And all this newspaper could do, with eight or 10 headlines, they showed a man bleeding, a civilian, who they claimed we had shot — one thing after another. It’s just unbelievable how people can take that away from what is happening in that country!

For Donald Rumsfeld, evidence of anarchy and chaos is not evidence of anarchy and chaos. For Donald Rumsfeld, the presence of evidence isn’t evidence of presence.

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[1] John Keats’s *Endymion (Book II)* (1818). But would Keats have seen Rumsfeld’s known unknown as a thing of beauty or a joy forever? Here is the quote from *Endymion*—

O known Unknown! from whom my being sips  
Such darling essence, wherefore may I not  
Be ever in these arms? in this sweet spot  
Pillow my chin for ever? (Book II, l. 741-44)

[2] Robert Browning, *The Ring and The Book* (1869)

O Thou, — as represented here to me  
In such conception as my soul allows, —  
Under Thy measureless, my atom width! —  
Man's mind — what is it but a convex glass  
Wherein are gathered all the scattered points  
Picked out of the immensity of sky,  
To re-unite there, be our heaven on earth,  
Our known unknown, our God revealed to man? (ll. 1308-15).

[3] Powell was clearly interested in the known and the unknown. Even though he disapproved of the philosophy of the unknown known, he toyed with the formulation in his description of the Grand Canyon, referring to it as “the Great Unknown.” See Edward Dolnick’s *Down the Great Unknown: John Wesley Powell’s 1869 Journey of Discovery and Tragedy Through the Grand Canyon* (2001).

[4] J. W. Powell. 1881, “Sketch of the Mythology of the North American Indians.” In the *First Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution*.

[5] Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, Penguin, 2011, p. xiv:

I first heard a variant of the phrase “known unknowns” in a discussion with former NASA administrator William R. Graham, when we served together on the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission in the late 1990s. Members of our bipartisan commission were concerned that some briefers from the U. S. intelligence community treated the fact that they lacked information about a possible activity to infer that the activity had not

happened and would not. In other words, if something could not be proven to be true, then it could be assumed not to be true. This led to misjudgments about the ballistic missile capabilities of other nations, which in some cases proved to be more advanced than previously thought.”

[6] Maria Ryan at the University of Birmingham (she’s currently affiliated with the University of Nottingham),

Thus what appeared to be an intelligence failure over Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction actually represented the temporary institutionalisation of a method of intelligence analysis long favoured by some conservative and neo-conservative hawks. Team B, the Rumsfeld Commission and the Office of Special Plans were all successful on their own terms, encouraging increases in defence expenditure, missile defence and war in Iraq as their authors had conceived.

However, in hindsight, not one of these reports proved correct in the long term. Team B reported just as the Soviet Union’s military expenditure was slowing and its economy was contracting (and 15 years later it would no longer exist); the United States does not face a hostile ballistic missile threat and will not in the near future; and Iraq’s WMD are nowhere to be found. In sum, although intelligence gathering may always be an inexact science, policy makers would do better to concentrate on what we do know rather than fantasise about what we do not.

[7] Donald Rumsfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. xiv-xv.

[8] Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Stanford University Press, 1962, pp. 400ff.

**The New York Times**

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The Opinion Pages

ERROL MORRIS

# The Certainty of Donald Rumsfeld (Part 3)

By **Errol Morris** March 27, 2014 8:00 pm

Errol Morris on photography.

*Read Part 1; Part 2; Part 4.*

## 3.

### A FAILURE OF IMAGINATION

Rumsfeld's life is bookended by two major historical events, two surprise attacks — the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 when he was 9 years old and 60 years later, the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Rumsfeld wrote in *Known and Unknown*:

I had dictated a note to myself [July 23, 2001] that I intended to offer when I was next testifying before Congress. “I do not want to be sitting before this panel in a modern day version of a Pearl Harbor post-mortem as to who didn't do what, when, where and why,” I wrote. “None of us would want to have to be back here going through that agony.”[1]

But he was back testifying before Congress several months after that memo was written — not for a post-mortem assessment of what had happened, but to plead for more money from Congress following the 9/11 attacks.

I sometimes remarked that the only thing surprising is that we continue to be surprised when a surprise occurs. In 1962, Harvard economist Thomas Schelling wrote a foreword to a book on Pearl Harbor that captured this idea

perfectly. “We were so busy thinking through some ‘obvious’ Japanese moves that we neglected to hedge against the choice that they actually made,” [Schelling] wrote. “There is a tendency in our planning to confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable.” I was so taken with his piece that I sent a copy to President Bush during our first month in office as well as to many members of Congress.[2]

This book by Roberta Wohlstetter and the foreword to this book by Thomas Schelling had been on Donald Rumsfeld’s mind *years before* he became President Gerald Ford’s secretary of defense in 1975. In his papers, there is a memo from Jan. 10, 1974, asking an aide to find the book in the library. He was then President Richard Nixon’s ambassador to NATO. And in March, 2001, as George W. Bush’s defense secretary, he sent a memo with the attached Schelling introduction to the members of the Joint Chiefs and to Carl Levin and John Warner, ranking Democratic and Republican members of the Armed Services Committee. Other members of Congress received a similar memo on Sept. 12, 2001. And it was sent again to the president on July 27, 2004 (during the Democratic National Convention).

In my interviews for my film *The Unknown Known*, I asked Rumsfeld about Wohlstetter’s book, but particularly about Schelling’s foreword — why it was important to him and why he described Pearl Harbor as “a failure of imagination.”

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** We didn’t know we didn’t know that they could do what they did the way they did it. We had people working on breaking codes. We had people thinking through, what are the kinds of things they might do? And, lo and behold, the carriers were able to — on a Sunday morning — get very close to Hawaii, launch their planes, and impose enormous destruction.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Was it failure of imagination, or failure to look at the intelligence that was available?

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** They had thought through a great many

more obvious possibilities. People were chasing the wrong rabbit. That one possibility was not something that they had imagined was likely.

A quibble with words? Why imagination? There was a glut of intelligence, but would a more active imagination have prevented Pearl Harbor? Or to put it crudely, was Pearl Harbor a failure to imagine Pearl Harbor? Or 9/11 a failure to imagine 9/11?

I talked to Thomas Schelling, the author of the foreword to Wohlstetter's book. Schelling is a legendary figure — a Nobel laureate, a professor at Harvard for over 30 years, one of the founders of the Kennedy School at Harvard, a game theorist, and an inspiration for the Stanley Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Kubrick actually came to Schelling's office at Harvard to discuss Schelling's essay "Meteors, Mischief and War," written around the same time as his foreword to Wohlstetter's book. The essay is about accidental nuclear war. Schelling argued, we need "strategic forces that do not have to go off like a match in a fireworks factory when the lights start flashing." [3] He was concerned with the possibility of a nuclear war started on faulty evidence or systemic bureaucratic failure. Schelling worried about how imagination might lead to war rather than how it might prevent it.

Schelling, now in his 90s, is retired. He stopped consulting for the government after Nixon's invasion of Cambodia in 1970. [4]

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** Way back — early in his reign at the Pentagon — I got a call from Donald Rumsfeld's secretary asking whether I would have lunch with him, and I said, "Sure." And so we made a date, and I called back and said, "Is it just me or is it a group? Is there a topic we are going to discuss?" And she let me talk to his military assistant, who said that he was so interested in my foreword to the Wohlstetter book that he wanted to meet me. It turned out that the day I was to have lunch with him, they had to call it off, because he'd been called up on the Hill or something. And then the next thing was that September 11th happened, and everything changed. I ended up never having lunch with him.

**ERROL MORRIS:** But it was clear that he was interested in the foreword —

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** I've told graduate students — if they want to get famous by planning to write a book, don't bother. Find a good book and write a foreword to it. Save yourself a lot of trouble. Anyway, it doesn't altogether surprise me that Rumsfeld remembers the foreword —

**ERROL MORRIS:** I believe he was intending to quote you directly: Pearl Harbor was “a failure of the imagination.” The only problem is the quote does not appear in your foreword. It represents an interpretation on his part of what you wrote —

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** What did I say that was close to that?

**ERROL MORRIS:** The last sentence. You had provided an extraordinary laundry list —

Here is part of Schelling's list. “Surprise, when it happens to a government, is likely to be a complicated, diffuse, bureaucratic thing. It includes neglect of responsibility, but also responsibility so poorly defined or so ambiguously delegated that action gets lost. It includes gaps in intelligence, but also intelligence that, like a string of pearls too precious to wear, is too sensitive to give to those who need it. It includes the alarm that fails to work, but also the alarm that has gone off so often it has been disconnected .... finally, as at Pearl Harbor surprise may include some measure of genuine novelty introduced by the enemy, and possibly some sheer bad luck.” But Schelling's foreword and Wohlstetter's book are less about the failure of imagination, than something very different — systemic bureaucratic confusion, ordinary human distractions, and an overwhelming glut of information with no clear idea of what anyone should be looking for.[5] Blame isn't heaped in any one place. Wohlstetter scrutinizes what seems to be the entirety of the public record and recounts and reconstructs failings at every level of the military and government.

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** I've actually got the foreword in front of me now. "The failure to anticipate effectively." The U.S. very greatly anticipated a Japanese attack. I take what they failed to recognize was that the Japanese may have felt that bombing the U.S. fleet was a prerequisite to beating us in a war. And we didn't anticipate that they could do something dramatic like destroying the battle fleet.

**ERROL MORRIS:** We also didn't believe that they would do it —

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** My brother was a naval officer at the time. I asked him, if we had expected an attack on Pearl Harbor, would we have had the fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbor? He thought about it and said, "Well, I don't know what we would have done with it. We probably would have been more alert to the possibility of an attack, and moved the fleet out, if we saw carriers approaching, or something." But whether this was a failure of imagination, I'm not sure. What happened on 9/11 was sufficiently implausible, but I won't blame a lack of imagination. It demonstrated a capacity for disciplined planning, secrecy and working out how to commandeer some airplanes and what targets to aim them at, trusting that the fuel on board would make them a pretty effective firebomb.

**ERROL MORRIS:** And the analogy to Pearl Harbor —

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** As I read Roberta Wohlstetter's book — I don't think 9/11 is analogous to Pearl Harbor. The U.S. was very conscious of the likelihood of a Japanese attack. The only question was, had they thought about an attack on the U.S. fleet? I don't think they credited the Japanese with being able to get aircraft close enough to catch us by surprise.

**ERROL MORRIS:** But her analysis inspired the foreword?

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** Roberta wrote the book as a RAND employee. RAND had to submit everything to the Air Force before outside

publication. And when her manuscript was submitted to the Air Force, it was essentially confiscated. It was claimed that she didn't have the clearance to possess her own book.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Really?

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** It was only after [President John F.] Kennedy was elected and a bunch of RAND people — including Charles Hitch, Kennedy's assistant secretary of defense, former head of economics at RAND and Wohlstetter's boss — got the Air Force to spring loose her manuscript, so she could publish it.[6] Then she asked me if I would write a foreword. I'd spent a whole year at RAND — the year '58-59. And Roberta and I had become very close friends.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Do you remember what impressed you most about the book when you read it?

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** I remember a couple of things, like a notion that some intelligence is so highly classified that the people who need it can't have access to it.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Well, it becomes a metaphor — if that's the right term — for Roberta Wohlstetter's book itself — a book so secret that she, the writer, was not allowed to be in possession of it.

Our attention was focused elsewhere. And we were not predisposed to believe that such an attack was possible. An early statement of this theme comes with Wohlstetter's analysis of the radar evidence on the Sunday morning of Dec. 7, 1941. The radar was turned *on*. The Opana radar station was manned by two privates. At 7:02 a.m. "something completely out of the ordinary" appeared on the screen. They called the switchboard at the information center. The switchboard operator picked up the phone. Eventually a lieutenant (and officer in training) was notified, but there were no procedures in place to relay the information to higher authorities, and the

inexperienced lieutenant explained away the radar event as likely caused by incoming American planes. Ultimately, the intelligence was ignored..[7] Ultimately, the intelligence was ignored.

This is one of my favorite themes. Believing is seeing. We see what we are prepared to see. The problem was not an absence of evidence. There was a glut of evidence. The problem was how to interpret it, how to *see* it.

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**ERROL MORRIS:** Rumsfeld has many expressions that he's fond of. He's a source of endless aphorisms and apothegms. He says that weakness is provocative. And that's another oddly suggestive expression. I wanted to ask you your thoughts about it as a game theorist.

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** "Weakness is provocative?"

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yes.

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** Meaning, it invites bullying or attack or something?

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yes.

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** I would say it can be. Back in the 1960s, there was a certain amount of talk about pre-empting a Chinese nuclear capability — before they had a recognizable ability to strike back. That was a case of weakness provoking thoughts. But it's a little like, the Franco-Prussian War broke out because the Germans had artillery technology that the French didn't yet have. The Germans estimated that within 10 years, the French would have artillery that could fire equally long distances, and that they would be wise to attack now, before France had stronger artillery capability. Weakness that is likely to become strength may invite questioning just in case we think there ever might be war — "Let's do it while

they're weak.”

**ERROL MORRIS:** There's weakness, and also the perception of weakness. But when you hear the phrase “weakness is provocative,” is it a universal principle?

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** No, no. Weakness can also be reassuring.

**ERROL MORRIS:** How so?

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** If a panhandler accosts me on a sidewalk, late at night, and there's nobody around, if it's clear that he's weak or crippled or something, I'm not the least bit afraid of him, because it looks like he wouldn't dare to start anything. But if he's a foot taller than I am, broad and husky-looking, and asks me for a dollar, I not only want to give him a dollar, I'm afraid if I withdraw my wallet from my pocket, he'll take the whole thing. If he's weak, he's no threat. I think we never worry about Mexico invading the United States because Mexico just hasn't any such capability.

**ERROL MORRIS:** But isn't at least Rumsfeld's idea that if we display any kind of weakness, it will be an invitation for people to attack us?

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** When he talks about weakness, does he mean “weak” in terms of lack of resolve, or does he mean military weakness?

**ERROL MORRIS:** My guess is that it would be military weakness. When he was secretary of defense in the Ford administration, he was a proponent of ramping up the defense budget, etc., etc., etc. His argument is — by the appearance of strength, or actual strength itself, that the country is safer from an attack. It certainly didn't prevent Pearl Harbor or 9/11.

**THOMAS SCHELLING:** I remember going way back, during the

so-called Berlin crises of the late 1950s. It used to be argued that if the Soviets began to bluster about taking Berlin under full party control, that the United States should ramp up the defense budget, as a kind of warning, a display. It never appealed to me much, but I remember it being talked about. Even somebody like Herman Kahn [a Cold War theorist who studied the survivability of thermonuclear war] said, “If you can’t think of anything else to do, raise the defense budget.”

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[1] Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, Penguin, 2011, p. 334.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Thomas Schelling, “Meteors, Mischief and War.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. XVI, No. 7, Sept. 1960.

[4] Robert Dodge, “Game Changer.” *Harvard Kennedy School Magazine*, Summer 2012.

[5] I looked through the Wohlstetter book for a passage on the role of imagination. It was not in the foreword, but perhaps it was discussed in the main body of the text. This is one of the few passages I came up with (p. 354):

It is interesting to observe now that Japanese and American estimates of the risks to the Japanese were identical for the large-scale war they had planned, as well as for the individual operations. What we miscalculated was the ability and willingness of the Japanese to accept such risks. As Ambassador Grew had said, “National sanity would dictate against such an event, but Japanese sanity cannot be measured by our own standards of logic.”

Our own standards, as we have observed them in military and State Department documents, reckoned the risks to the Japanese as too large, and therefore not likely to be taken. They were too large. But they were going to be taken. And we missed this apparently illogical connection because we did

not include in our reckoning any consideration of the alternative of “gradual exhaustion,” the danger of encirclement and defeat without having struck a single blow. Our own standards of logic pointed to the easier British and Dutch targets, but the Japanese regarded the American-British-Dutch alliance as a firm one, which committed us to war if the easier targets were attacked. Our own naval standards assumed no more than two carriers for a single seaborne air attack, because we were accustomed to thinking in terms of our own capabilities. Even in the congressional hearings, as late as 1945, with the evidence of six carriers before them, naval witnesses often refer to four carriers because it was beyond the reach of imagination [my emphasis] that any naval power would risk its entire heavy carrier strength in one operation. Even if we had played out a Japanese war game, we might not have been able to project the daring and ingenuity of the enemy.

[6] *Pearl Harbor, Warning and Decision*, and the foreword by Thomas Schelling were first published in 1962, but a previous classified version was written for RAND, *Signals and Decisions at Pearl Harbor, R-331* in 1958.

[7] Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Stanford University Press, 1962, pp. 11-12.

**The New York Times**

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The Opinion Pages

ERROL MORRIS

# The Certainty of Donald Rumsfeld (Part 4)

By **Errol Morris** March 28, 2014 8:00 pm

Errol Morris on photography.

*Read Part 1; Part 2; Part 3.*

## 4.

### **ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE ISN'T EVIDENCE OF ABSENCE**

The phrase “absence of evidence isn’t evidence of absence” has been attributed to Martin Rees, O.M., astronomer royal, former master of Trinity College, and ex-president of the Royal Society.[1] It was used by him and then by Carl Sagan in discussions about the possibility of intelligent life somewhere else in the cosmos. (There are those who believe we have no direct evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence and those who believe we *might* have direct evidence, e.g., “The Wow! Signal,” a strong signal detected by a radio telescope that has never been repeated.)[2] And it involves questions about the nature of evidence, about how to separate in a mass of data the signal from the noise.

I have met Martin Rees a number of times, most recently at Stephen Hawking’s 70th-birthday party, and so I called him hoping to get some additional insight into his use of the phrase.

**ERROL MORRIS:** The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence — every time I’ve tried to track down its origins, it leads back to you.

**MARTIN REES:** I’ve used it, but I’m sure I wasn’t the first to use it.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Does it appear in any of your books or writings?

**MARTIN REES:** It certainly appears in some of my written lectures. [The citations are few and far between. But it was attributed to Martin Rees in a symposium on extraterrestrial intelligence, *Life Beyond Earth and the Mind of Man*, edited by Richard Berendzen.[3]]

**ERROL MORRIS:** Even if you didn’t originate it, I was hoping you would explain to me what you meant by it.

**MARTIN REES:** I don’t think it’s anything profound. It’s within the context of looking for aliens — if we don’t see anything, it doesn’t mean they’re not there. They may be very different from us; they may not be trying to communicate. When I’ve used it, it’s just been in that specific sense.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Well, I think what happened is — and I could be completely wrong about this — that it appeared initially in the context of, “Is there life elsewhere in the universe?” And it’s not just an absence of evidence, because we have all kinds of statistical evidence that would suggest that there *is*.

**MARTIN REES:** No, we don’t. We don’t have *any* evidence.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yes and no. We have statistical evidence. We have evidence of how many planets that might be like ours? For example, the Drake equation [the equation that estimates the likelihood of life elsewhere in the universe] [4] —

**MARTIN REES:** Yes. But we don't *know* if life started in these places. Certainly, at the time of the Cyclops [Project Cyclops: A Design Study of a System for Detecting Extraterrestrial Intelligent Life, NASA, 1971], they were looking for signals from intelligent life. And even if simple life is common, then intelligent life may be rare. And only a tiny subset of intelligent life might be sending out signals.

**ERROL MORRIS:** But Rumsfeld, when he used it —

**MARTIN REES:** I didn't know he *had* used it.

**ERROL MORRIS:** He used it again and again. He used it in the case of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Presumably, the argument is, “Just because we can't find any evidence that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction, that doesn't mean he *doesn't have* weapons of mass destruction.”

**MARTIN REES:** I don't regard that as profound. It's a fairly obvious comment that is used in all kinds of different contexts.

**ERROL MORRIS:** And the known known and the known unknown?

**MARTIN REES:** This is not profound, either, but it's an interesting distinction. Most people who write about risk and hazard would distinguish between risk and uncertainty.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yes, but —

**MARTIN REES:** Risk is something where you can assign a probability. But as to what's going to happen in 10 or 20 years, then you can't really assign realistic probabilities. I suppose that'd be what you'd call an “unknown unknown.” Ultimately, I don't think there's anything special in the scientific method that goes beyond what a detective does.

I believe Martin Rees is correct. There is no direct evidence of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, though we have statistical evidence to suggest that it might be out there. We have theories about where to look for it, how we might detect it, how rare it might be, and so on. We have charts and equations and tools and algorithms to help direct our focus.[5] But is combing the cosmos for signs of intelligent life really just like inspecting Iraq for signs of W.M.D.?

Martin Rees wrote in *Our Cosmic Habitat*:

Some brains may package reality in a fashion that we can't conceive. Others could be uncommunicative: living contemplative lives, perhaps deep under some planetary ocean, doing nothing to reveal their presence. There may be a lot more life out there than we could ever detect. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.[6]

Absence of *direct* evidence, may not be *proof* of absence, but often absence of evidence is evidence of absence. If a weapons inspector looks for W.M.D. in a building and finds nothing, is that absence of evidence? Or evidence of absence? I would argue that it is evidence of absence. Rumsfeld took a principle used in one context — is there intelligent life elsewhere in the *universe* — and applied it to Iraq. Imagine someone tells you that there is an elephant in the room. You search the room, opening drawers, checking closets, looking under the bed. No elephant. Absence of evidence or evidence of absence?

Hans Blix, the executive chairman of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission, addressed some of these concerns in his book *Disarming Iraq*:

Several countries, including the U.S., had given us a good number of sites for possible inspection, and at none of the many sites we actually inspected had we found any prohibited activity. The sites we had been given were supposedly the best that the various intelligence agencies could give. This shocked me. If this was the best, what was the rest? Well, I could not exclude the possibility that there was solid non-site related intelligence that

was not shared with us, and which conclusively showed that Iraq still had weapons of mass destruction. But could there be 100-percent certainty about the existence of weapons of mass destruction but zero-percent knowledge about their location?[7]

Blix leaves us with a rhetorical question. Could there be 100 percent certainty of the existence of W.M.D. in Iraq and no knowledge of where they might be? Blix's answer is — probably not. In a news conference on Sept. 26, 2002, Pam Hess asked Rumsfeld:

**PAM HESS:** If an inspection team goes in now and finds nothing, because perhaps Iraq is very good at hiding it, or perhaps they have nothing — but you all are of the belief that they have it. If they find nothing, does it make your job more difficult in trying to assemble an international coalition to disarm him by other means?

**DONALD RUMSFELD:** Goodness gracious, that is kind of like looking down the road for every conceivable pothole you can find and then driving into it. I don't get up in the morning and ask myself that. *We know* they have weapons of mass destruction. We know they have active programs. There isn't any debate about it [my emphasis].

Ultimately, W.M.D. were not found in Iraq, and Rumsfeld's belief proved to be false. Many people assume that Rumsfeld was lying. That he knew that there were no W.M.D. in Iraq. But I believe that he was able to convince himself that he was telling the truth. Or even worse, that he lacked the ability to discriminate between truth and fantasy. That over the years he had developed a gobbledygook philosophy that — seemingly paying lip service to empiricism — devalued evidence and made a mockery of logic. Alas, if you believe that you are 100 percent right, then your beliefs are like a hard, impenetrable, protective shell, like the carapace of a turtle. [8]

What do I take from this? To me, progress hinges on our ability to discriminate knowledge from belief, fact from fantasy, on the basis of evidence. It's not the known unknown from the known known, or the unknown unknown from the known

unknown, that is crucial to progress. It's what evidence do you have for X, Y or Z? What is the justification for your beliefs? When confronted with such a question, Rumsfeld was never, ever able to come up with an answer.

The history of the Iraq war is replete with false assumptions, misinterpreted evidence, errors in judgment. Mistakes can be made. We all make them. But Rumsfeld created a climate where mistakes could be made with little or no way to correct them. Basic questions about evidence for W.M.D. were replaced with equivocations and obfuscations. A hall of mirrors. An infinite regress to nowhere. What do I know I know? What do I know I know I know? What do I know I don't know I don't know? Ad infinitum. Absence of evidence could be evidence of absence or evidence of presence. Take your pick. An obscurantist's dream.

There's a quotation I have never liked. It comes from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*. "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Not really. The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and *know* they are opposed.

People embrace contradictory positions, often without being aware of it. Sometimes not caring. Sometimes proud of it. Rumsfeld seems (with pleasure) to say "p" and "not-p." What he would call the two sides of the coin. One side: "If you wish for peace, prepare for war." The other side, "Belief in the inevitability of conflict can become one of its main causes." Not exactly a contradiction. But where does he stand? His follow-up: "All generalizations are false, including this one" — doesn't clarify much of anything.[9]

When asked how Colin Powell could have presented such shoddy evidence for W.M.D. in Iraq to the United Nations, Rumsfeld told me, "...because he believed it." Fine, as far as it goes. My guess is Rumsfeld is right. When Powell appeared before the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003, he believed what he was saying.[10]

The secretary also showed satellite photographs of what he said were chemical and biological facilities, and drawings based on witnesses' descriptions of trucks and rail cars converted into mobile laboratories for

lethal materials, allegedly intended to evade detection. He said various records and intelligence showed that Mr. Hussein was making nuclear weapons and developing rockets and aircraft to deliver all his weapons.[11]

Rumsfeld, too, may believe what he is saying. But believing something does not make it true. The question is *why* he believed what he believed. On the basis of what *evidence*? Mere belief is not enough.

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice, perplexed by her encounter with the Cheshire Cat, says, "I have seen a cat without a grin, but I have never seen a grin without a cat." I had a similar experience with Donald Rumsfeld — his grin and my puzzlement about what it might mean. I was left with the frightening suspicion that the grin might not be hiding anything. It was a grin of supreme self-satisfaction and behind the grin might be nothing at all.

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[1] In a somewhat different form it appears in the writings of William Cowper, although I have been hard-pressed to find any specific attribution. But Cowper's version involves *proof*, not *evidence*. That absence of proof isn't proof of absence. Just because we haven't been able to prove that God exists doesn't mean that he doesn't. Samuel Joeckel writes in an article for *Quodlibet* journal entitled "Localizing the Problem of Evil: William Cowper and the Poetics of Perspectivalism":

Throughout his life, Cowper suffered from psychological disorders and traumas that racked his tempestuous mind and soul. In his provocatively titled study, *Boswell's Clap and Other Essays: Medical Analyses of Literary Men's Afflictions*, medical doctor William B. Ober diagnoses Cowper as a "psychotic who suffered from mental depression with suicidal tendencies. His madness was colored strongly by religious delusions centering about his own damnation."

[2] On the night of Aug. 15, 1977, an extraordinary signal was detected by the Big Ear radio telescope at The Ohio State University. Dr. Jerry Ehman — reviewing the recent computer printouts recording what Big Ear had "heard" — was astonished to see that the telescope had detected a strong, narrowband radio signal that seemed

to fit the pattern researchers expected to see if intelligent life attempted to make contact.

The alphanumeric sequence circled in the Wow! Signal indicates the intensity variation of the signal as received at the Big Ear radio telescope, and functions as a sort of signal-to-noise ratio. Each number or letter indicates the number of standard deviations (A=10, B=11, etc.) by which the received signal exceeded the average background noise. These numbers and letters tell us both that the signal received was way louder than the noise of space, and also that it increased and faded in intensity in a manner consistent with a transmission received from an extraterrestrial source. That is to say, it came from outer space, it was loud, and it lasted for as long as we could measure. Alas, it was never detected again.

[3] Berendzen writes:

A generation ago almost all scientists would have argued, often *ex cathedra*, that there probably is no life in the universe besides what we know here on Earth. But as Martin Rees, the cosmologist, has succinctly put it, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

[4] The Drake equation calculates  $N$ , the number of civilizations in our galaxy with which radio-communication might be possible based on—

- $R^*_I$  = the average rate of star formation in our galaxy
- $f_p$  = the fraction of those stars that have planets
- $n_e$  = the average number of planets that can potentially support life per star that has planets
- $f_l$  = the fraction of planets that could support life that actually develop life at some point
- $f_i$  = the fraction of planets with life that actually go on to develop intelligent life (civilizations)
- $f_c$  = the fraction of civilizations that develop a technology that releases detectable signs of their existence into space
- $L$  = the length of time for which such civilizations release detectable signals

into space.

The last variable “L” estimates how long before civilizations blow themselves up or go extinct.

[5] The chart depicts the terrestrial microwave window — the range of frequencies at which SETI Researchers expect to be able to intercept a signal coming from another planet. Between 1 and 10 GHz, a signal can travel through both outer space and the Earth’s atmosphere without much interference. Above 10 GHz, water and oxygen in Earth’s atmosphere will begin to interfere with the reception of the signal. The range from 1 to 10 GHz comprises about 9 billion channels, each of which can be monitored from Earth, and one of which we might expect alien life to utilize if they want to broadcast across the cosmos.

[6] Martin Rees, *Our Cosmic Habitat*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 28.

[7] Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq*, Pantheon, 2004, p. 156.

[8] Bayes’ Theorem doesn’t apply if you are 100 percent convinced you are right. Contrary or supplementary evidence—no matter how well supported—will have no effect on that conviction.

[9] “All generalizations are false, including this one” leads logically to “Some generalizations are true.” If you wish to trace this error back, consider “All Cretans lie,” uttered by a Cretan. It can’t be true, but it can be false. What’s interesting is that it not only leads to “Some Cretans tell the truth,” but it also leads to the conclusion that the Cretan speaking is not one of them.

[10] Colin Powell from Sept. 8, 2005:

I looked at the four [sources] that [the C.I.A.] gave me for [the mobile bio-labs], and they stood behind them, ... Now it appears not to be the case that it was that solid. At the time I was preparing the presentation, it was presented to me as being solid, April 3, 2004.

[I felt] terrible ... [giving the speech] ... It’s a blot. I’m the one who presented it on behalf of the United States to the world, and [it] will always be a part of

my record. It was painful. It's painful now.

[11] *The New York Times*, “Powell, in U.N. Speech, Presents Case To Show Iraq Has Not Disarmed,” Feb. 6, 2003.

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