Rumsfeld Is Correct - the Truth Will Get Out

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NEW YORK "Ultimately the truth gets out, notwithstanding people's efforts to the contrary."

This sentence was uttered last week by Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. defense secretary, during a visit to Singapore. He was irritated at the time, as he often is, by what he regarded as a boneheaded question from a journalist about whether the Pentagon was too obsessed with Iraq to watch China's military.

But of course the words have a wider relevance to the Rumsfeldian universe. Indeed, in the mouth of their author they amount to a gem. The defense secretary, by design or despite himself, and more often the latter, is a master of the bon mot. Alas, he is not a master of self-criticism.

This, after all, is the same man who, back in 2002, tried to argue that the absence of evidence for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction needed some perspective. "Simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist," he declared.

Or, as he put it in attempting to elaborate: "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Or, trying again:

"There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know."

It seems Rumsfeld has a French side. Where is Descartes when you need him?

Unraveling all this was never simple. The unknown unknown: that's deep. But ultimately the truth gets out and lends itself to a simple declarative sentence. There were no Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

This is also the man who responded to the wholesale looting in the wake of Saddam Hussein's downfall in 2003 by saying, "Freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things." Or, in a more succinct exegesis: "Stuff happens."

Yes, stuff does, and ultimately the truth gets out.

The truth, in this case, that Rumsfeld was so focused on the plan of attack in Iraq and securing Saddam's overthrow with a lean force, he had no time for any plan for the aftermath. So there was no post-invasion plan worth its name, to stop looting or a gathering insurgency.

Nor did Rumsfeld have time for the senior commander who questioned his nonplan. General Eric Shinseki, the former chief of staff of the army, was humiliated after suggesting "several hundred thousand troops" would be needed to secure Iraq. Rumsfeld didn't even bother to attend his retirement ceremony.
All this braggadocio ended up leaving the troops on the ground in Iraq exposed. Staff Sergeant Christopher Bush told me patrols in 2003 were known as "suicide runs." Humvees had no armor or turret shields.

Bush would remove the fiberglass doors so that it was easier to shoot; the doors were useless anyway. "Nobody told us to expect or prepare for that warfare," Bush said.

Least of all the defense secretary, whose lapidary comment was: "As you know, you go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time."

But ultimately the truth gets out. You go to a war of choice, when you are the U.S. military, in the strength you opt to deploy, and if your calculation of that deployment - its nature, challenges and duration - is erroneous, you pay the price in the form of more than 2,400 dead Americans.

Or, as marine Lieutenant General Gregory Newbold, one of the retired generals who called for Rumsfeld's departure earlier this year, put it: decisions were made "with a casualness and swagger that are the special province of those who have never had to execute these missions - or bury the results."

On the subject of such burials, by the way, Rumsfeld has another bon mot: "Death has a tendency to encourage a depressing view of war."

Yes, Mr. Secretary, it does.

Another truth about death is now coming out. It concerns what happened on Nov. 19, 2005, in the farming town of Haditha, in Iraq's troubled Anbar Province. On that day, 24 Iraqi civilians were killed, as first reported by Time magazine.

An initial statement from the marines said 15 had been killed by a roadside bomb, and others by marines returning fire when their convoy was attacked.

It now appears, on the contrary, that a military investigation will confirm that, as Representative John Murtha, Democrat of Pennsylvania, has said, "Our troops overreacted because of the pressure on them, and they killed innocent civilians in cold blood."

Stuff happens. People lose it on Los Angeles freeways or in the New York subway. They lose it more often, and more devastatingly, when they're in a war against a shadowy enemy moving seamlessly through a sympathetic civilian population. We all remember My Lai.

Haditha is not My Lai. But it may resemble it at least in this respect: the suggestion of a cover-up in the aftermath of the killing is strong. Rumsfeld is promising clarity: "There's an investigation going on as to what took place. There's an investigation going as to what took place after whatever took place."

That French side, again.

I don't doubt Rumsfeld wants a thorough investigation. But there's a problem: when swagger and cavalier lack of preparation and disregard for facts have been your hallmarks, things tend to happen in your image. That's a truth Rumsfeld may ultimately have to face.

He said something else in Singapore, about Iraq. "Suddenly they are going to have a constitution - a piece of paper - that's going to have to hold the country together; not repression by a vicious dictator, but a piece of paper. And that is a big thing."

It sure is. And it needed more nurturing than Rumsfeld had patience for. Which is not a reason to cut and run now. Ultimately the truth gets out.

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