

There are two films on release now that every reader of Defence Viewpoints should see ♦ The Unknown Known and The Patrol (reviewed by us on 13th March 2014) ♦   103 minutes of total immersion in the world of Donald Rumsfeld ♦ strangely ♦ can't yet be seen in the USA, but director Errol Morris has had it on the European festival circuit, and brought it to Brixton to be seen by 499 youngish people who seemed to be fixated on Iraq Act 1, and one writer in a tie and pin stripe suit. This "review" consists of the random musings of the latter, the director in a Q and A session with the audience, and the two-time Secretary of State for Defense (and nearly Vice President and President) ♦  Errol Morris considers he's made a movie about self deception, delusion, the ability of his subject to retreat into a sea of words. ♦  ♦  Donald Rumsfeld is interviewed seated against a dark background, the screen filled solely with his head and shoulders, his eyes challenging the interviewer/director before during and after every question and answer, scarcely blinking. There is no physical hiding place. Plain questions are asked. The answers aren't challenged, but often clips from interviews many years ago, contradicting what you've just heard, are played. Or Rumsfeld is heard reading over an extract from one of his "snowflakes" ♦ the estimated 20,000 memos he dictated during his time at Defense. ♦  The result, in Morris's words, is "genuine, sincere, truly horrible." "To lie, you have to know you are telling an untruth....the possibility is that he's completely sincere. His smile seems to be completely sincere. (But) it's clear what he said is untrue." ♦  "For 30 years he was lying every time he went on television," asserted Morris, himself in a "stress position" under attack from another documentary film maker Sean Callister as "a candy ass" for conducting a non-adversarial interview. But Morris stated firmly several times that he had complete editorial control. However, having posed the question himself "Do I think he's a war criminal" and answering in the affirmative, Morris's delivery was sometimes as elliptical as that he was criticising in his subject, and he didn't take his critics' adverse opinions graciously. ♦  For the aficionado who wanted to get a direct "take" on some of the most turbulent times, the film is a gold mine. Amongst Rumsfeld's "snowflakes" was one a few months before 9/11 that he wouldn't want to be in Pearl Harbour-like Congressional hearings ♦ which was precisely where he was some time helping wounded to be evacuated after the plane strike on the Pentagon. He dwelt for some time on "failures of intelligence" which he several times characterised as being surprised by a failure of imagination" ♦ exactly as before Pearl Harbour. "We were chasing the wrong rabbit". ♦  His post 9/11 memo "strategic thoughts" contained objectives like fears over a nuclear Iraq, and the importance of getting Syria out of Lebanon. He was no novice in this area ♦ he'd been a Special Envoy criss-crossing the Middle East, and famously shaking hands with Saddam Hussain (although he seemed much more fascinated with Tariq Azziz). This was one frustration of the film ♦ the director allowed him to "chase the rabbit" of a long anecdote about being taken into one of the Iraq dictator's palaces rather than focussing on the substance of the discussions. ♦  Rumsfeld's hawkish tendencies are often to the fore (as in his memo about the cost benefit analysis of equipment used between the two wars policing the Iraq no-fly zones), but Morris left in a passage in which he shed a tear over a visit to a military hospital and a serviceman who wasn't expected to "make it" (although he did). Morris is proud however that the film "doesn't suffer from faux-redemption" as did his one about Robert Macnamara "The fog of war" (who he also considers to be a war criminal). Much of the audience was too young to appreciate that Rumsfeld falling out with Nixon's Chief of Staff H R

Haldeman (a role Rumsfeld filled for President Ford) might be a mild redemption.

Dora Farms was both a failure of intelligence ♦ agents were certain Saddam Hussain was there, and an air strike killed several anonymous people ♦ but also a pretty blatant lie. "We don't assassinate the leaders of other countries" was juxtaposed with another Rummie anecdote about the mission and his seat in the Oval Office, in direct contradiction to what he had just said.

The ending, in a tangle of knowns and unknowns, was perhaps fitting. Rumsfeld was indeed in a sea of words, the definition of which often tangled with that peculiar military-speak, will as often obscure as enlighten. But perhaps that is inevitable. In an interconnected world, every word Western leaders utter is said before Bin Laden's successors. A good deal more than walls now have ears.

And to the sniggerers in the audience, as well as the professional cynic and public advocate of putting Tony Blair on trial, the evening's interlocutor "comedian" and cynic Jeremy Hardy, the one would ask "how's the policy of non-intervention solving anything in Syria?"

There's an extended essay by Errol Morris in the New York Times on the philosophy of Donald Rumsfeld.