

Errol Morris' 'The Unknown Known' Seeks Donald Rumsfeld

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- [2001](#) [2]
- [9/11](#) [3]
- [Dick Cheney](#) [4]
- [Donald Rumsfeld](#) [5]
- [Errol Morris](#) [6]
- [George W. Bush](#) [7]
- [Gerald Ford](#) [8]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [9]
- [Iraq War](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [12]
- [Pentagon](#) [13]
- [RADIUS-TWC](#) [14]
- [Richard M. Nixon](#) [15]
- [Robert McNamara](#) [16]
- [Secretary of Defense](#) [17]
- [September 11th](#) [18]
- [The Fog of War](#) [19]
- [The Unknown Known](#) [20]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The reason some people fit into government service is fairly well-defined in the latest film by iconic documentary-maker Errol Morris. His profile of ex-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in “The Unknown Known” is a tale of history – affected by war, death, torture and justification. The power of government men in suits and what happens when the power is realized flows through Rumsfeld like water through a faucet, and who or what shuts it off, is often determined by the title of the film.

This documentary is different from the previous Morris exploration of decision having to do with United States defense, “The Fog of War.” Whereas Robert McNamara – the Secretary of Defense during the Viet Nam era – gave eleven lessons of war in that film, Donald Rumsfeld goes over a history of memos during his reign of defense under presidents Gerald Ford and George W. Bush. The absorbing portrait is really about decision-making and the justifications surrounding the decisions – and how it leads down the Alice in Wonderland rabbit hole. For example, how legalities drawn up for “enhanced interrogation” techniques can be interpreted and misused down the chain of command. Rumsfeld is a cool cat, but that doesn’t mean his decisions don’t have implications – which is a true understatement.

Donald Henry “Rummy” Rumsfeld served as the 13th Secretary of Defense under Gerald Ford in 1975, and as the 21st Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush – making him both the youngest and oldest to have served. He was involved in the major strategies regarding the fall of Saigon, which effectively lost the war in Viet Nam for the United States, and the post September 11th war policy in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which drained U.S. treasury and cost lives as framed within the “war on terror.”



War Years: Donald Rumsfeld Makes His Case in 'The Unknown Known'
Photo credit: RADIUS-TWC

In a response to fruitless effort to find Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, during a press briefing in 2002, Rumsfeld said the following ... "as we know, there are known knowns; there are things that we know that 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 the unknown unknowns – the ones we don't we don't know." Rumsfeld later added in a memo ... "There are also unknown knowns – that is to say that the things you think you know, it turns out you did not."

And basically that is where Morris goes with Rumsfeld, down the rabbit hole of theoretic justifications for war and remembrance. There is a telling point in which Morris reminds Rumsfeld of what the majority of Americans eventually felt, that he was "obsessed" with war in Iraq. Rumsfeld corrects him, he is not obsessed, but a cool and calm character. He goes on to prove it in the overview of his career.

There is no regret from Rumsfeld. And from his side, the film is an interesting exploration of what happens when the top of the chain makes a decisions – or lawyers themselves up – and what are the implications of those decisions or laws down the military chain of command. This is best expressed in the horrific 2006 Abu Ghraib torture photos and circumstance, which came from a directive regarding treatment of detainees at Guantanamo.

It's also fascinating as history. Rumsfeld was first elected to congress in 1962, so many of his decisions are based in the tumultuous 1960s world of civil rights legislation and the Viet Nam War. He admits that he may not have made the right decisions, but he always justified it through the use of his memos – each of which he had nicknamed "snowflakes" – with the blizzard finally ending when he left office in 2006. The basis for the film and its information lies within the memos, which are intriguing as hindsight and within the events it dictated.



Director Errol Morris Delineates His Subject in 'The Unknown Known'
Photo credit: RADIUS-TWC

The style of the film is so captivating, as each of Rumsfeld's justifications are countered with what actually happened. Will history, as he claims, expand upon how these justifications are sound? Well, score a point for Rumsfeld in the film with his assertion that while President Obama ran on his opposition to the Guantanamo prison, The Patriot Act and Bush/Rumsfeld doctrines, they are all for the most part still in place. It's possible that Morris presents a point-of-view through Rumsfeld that decisions made are different when you have to make them.

There is no question, though, that the acts of the Bush administration turned foreign policy upside down and sent it down that rabbit hole. Like in the novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four," when Oceania is fighting a perpetual war with Eurasia and Eastasia, there is no truth, only – as so Orwellian-ly stated – the "unknown knowns."

"The Unknown Known" continues its limited release in Chicago on April 18th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Errol Morris and Donald Rumsfeld. Written and directed by Errol Morris. Rated "PG-13"



[21]

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- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/2001>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/911>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/dick-cheney>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/donald-rumsfeld>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/errol-morris>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/george-w-bush>
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- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/patrick-mcdonald>
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- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/radius-twc>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/richard-m-nixon>

- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/robert-mcnamara>
- [17] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/secretary-of-defense>
- [18] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/september-11th>
- [19] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/the-fog-of-war>
- [20] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/the-unknown-known>
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