

Of Rumsfeld and Resolutions

Daniel Mathews

31 December, 2007

Donald Rumsfeld's presence as an appointee at the Hoover Institution — Stanford's own conservative think tank — is an unbearable, yet constant, provocation here on campus.

The response by students has largely been one of disgust and rejection, but the response has varied across many variables: in strength, in courage, and in integrity. The lowest point, however, was an attempt to raise the matter in the undergraduate senate — a body of 15 senators elected by the undergraduate student population.

A resolution was put before the senate — not a resolution sponsored by activist groups, or by Rumsfeld supporters, but by a senator who thought the matter should be addressed. Whatever this resolution's failings — and there were many — at the very least, the matter did come to a vote.

The vote, however, was not on the issue of the greatest magnitude — waging aggressive war did not even rate a mention in the resolution. Nor even on the issue of massive humanitarian law violations — torture was not important, either. Nor his other abuses of power for pharmaceutical companies or the military-industrial complex — these were far off the radar. No, it was limited to protest at the word “distinguished” in Rumsfeld's new title (“distinguished visiting fellow”), to the damage done to “Stanford's brand and prestige”, and to “unneeded controversy and publicity”. The only mention of the war was his role in “the development of a case for unpopular war that many deem unjust”, weasel words if ever there were any, transferring warmongering to developing a case, and the supreme international crime to something “unpopular” which “many deem unjust”. It would be wrong to call the resolution a denunciation of Rumsfeld's appointment: it ended not with demands, not with resolution for any action, but merely statements that the appointment “ignores the prevailing campus sentiment” — an established empirical fact that hardly merits resolving on — and was “not in the best interest of the university”. It was as minimal an “anti-Rumsfeld” resolution as it is possible to conceive.

Even so, the resolution failed: 8 for, 2 abstaining, 5 against, requiring 10 votes to pass.

It did not fail because there are 5 or 7 hardcore Republicans and Rumsfeld supporters on the Senate. It did not fail because it was regarded as shamefully

tepid or vapid. It failed, rather, seemingly because it was not regarded as part of the Senate's jurisdiction, which rather concerns itself with more immediate matters, like providing free bike lights. I know of nothing in the student union constitution that restricts the Senate's scope. Moreover, being elected from the undergraduate student population, it is well situated as a representative body — there is no reason why they cannot make declarations reflecting the will of the student body at large. No, it was simply pure cowardice, pure meekness, pure confrontation avoidance — even though there was no confrontation involved — and even to the point of voting against the sentiment of an overwhelming majority. Truly a pathetic showing.

Now a new resolution is proposed, claiming to be some form of compromise. It is difficult to see how one could come up with an even more minimal proposal, but here at Stanford of course there are plenty of clever minds, and it can be done — it is now possible to conceive of an even more minimal proposal! The compromise is not with any pro-Rumsfeld sympathies, which barely exist, but with the Senate's apparent desire to do something of immediate benefit. Namely, the proposal is to invite Rumsfeld to speak to the student body. No critical language will be in this resolution, except perhaps one or two sentences included in discussions with the anti-war/anti-Rumsfeld activist group, along the lines of "having conducted such a secretive administration at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld should now embrace the open values of the university".

So this newly proposed bill barely scratches any of the issues above, perhaps only freedom of speech, orders of magnitude below the important issues — and then, it is phrased not as denunciation, not even as concern, but as open invitation.

I must admit, putting this in perspective, the mind boggles. It's incredible. The Senate bills have ignored entirely the supreme international crime, international humanitarian law violations, and outrageous abuses of power. When confronted with a resolution indicating concern — not denunciation — regarding the comparatively imperceptible issues of academic procedure and freedom of speech, it fails, acting against the established sentiment of those it represents. And now, it considers an open invitation to the perpetrator of crimes against humanity.

Perhaps it is all that can be done. But the moral level of this resolution should be understood. We probably have much better outlets for our energy than in lobbying for such a vacuous, feeble, morally stilted, ethically questionable proposal. I would suggest a better approach would be to try to change the atmosphere, and the political conditions, so that the senate would vote in favour of something meaningful. But that is a tactical question, one to be discussed and one on which I am not so sure.

Of course, these thoughts are meant in a spirit of friendly democratic discussion. This is certainly not intended to cause any sort of offence to people at Stanford who have worked hard towards a just cause. I think I would still rather see this bill pass rather than fail, as a less-than-minimal token of resistance; but that is not the right question to focus on. Much better to focus on the creation of an atmosphere in which the presence of warmongers and torturers so pro-

vokes us, that conscience will no longer let that presence remain. If actions and events raise the level of awareness, resistance, and empowerment, then tepidity and cowardice by student senators will no longer stand, either.