

Rumsfeld and Stanford

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In life, some things matter more than others. Indeed, one of the great capacities of human thought is the ability to “jump out of the system”, to break out of habits and routines and notice that more important things are afoot. Some considerations just trump others. Some considerations come in such different orders of magnitude that one makes the other almost entirely insignificant. In mathematics this idea is encapsulated by the symbol “ \gg ”. It is a common idea, and an intuitive one.

So, consider the issues surrounding Rumsfeld’s appointment here at Stanford, and the reaction to it. The issues come in rather different orders of magnitude.

First there is the “issue” of Rumsfeld’s freedom of speech; and freedom of speech is always a serious issue, though not usually for those who are or have been in government, with guaranteed fame and media time and millions of followers.

Then there is the issue that this man was appointed to an academic institution, despite having no relevant academic qualifications whatsoever. Moreover, he was appointed to a “distinguished” position. His political connections have wangled him a plum job at a prestigious memorial home for robber barons, colonial tyrants and kings, and their apologists. A severe injustice, an outrage: the cronyism and the sight of conservative economic and political power perpetuating their own, no longer even pretending to follow academic rules. The phallus at the centre of the prestigious academy reveals itself once more as nothing of any academic sort whatsoever. We are called to arms; it is outrageous. The freedom of speech issue pales in comparison; it is, indeed, shrunk to imperceptible.

But there is another set of considerations, concerning some of the things he did while he held power of one sort or another. Politically manipulating the FDA to get aspartame approved, despite studies linking it to brain cancer, and despite a unanimous vote of an FDA board to deny approval. Spreading paranoia of Soviet missile gaps and geopolitical fantasies which served to feed the military-industrial complex. Meeting with Saddam Hussein, all the better to provide him with weaponry to prosecute a brutal, atrocious and insane war against Iran. Conspiring, while out of power, with the “Project for a New American Century” for a series of wars and conflicts to remake the world down

the barrel of the American gun, to establish military “full spectrum dominance” over the earth: it is not only evil masterminds in James Bond movies who plot world domination. These are serious abuses of power, serious and sustained actions to further a cause of domination and control, with consequences on an international scale; questions of academic credentials and procedure, again, pale in comparison. The academic questions, let alone his freedom of speech, shrink, again, to imperceptible.

The considerations do not stop there; and they escalate, once more. For there are direct, clear, and attributable directives, from this man, to violate the most basic principles of international humanitarian law. He launched a policy to treat detainees inhumanely, authorising torture, authorising techniques which clearly amount to torture — indeed, taking great personal interest in their implementation, to a level far beyond that required by his position, to an extent that can only be described as sadistic. Whatever aspartame or missile gap paranoia might have done, they did not directly cause such suffering, in undisguised and brazen violation of international law — the Geneva Conventions, laws regarded around the world as a fundamental standard of humanity and civilization. These are serious international crimes. His previous abuses of power, again, pale. The academic questions and his freedom of speech become no more than a joke.

But the litany does not finish, even at international crimes of this magnitude. For Rumsfeld the litany only ends at “the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole” — namely, aggressive war. The quotation is from the Nuremberg tribunal. It is the same crime for which Nazi ministers were hanged at Nuremberg. Rumsfeld, along with others, was a principal architect of an aggressive war against Iraq, with no justifications of self-defence, and no UN sanction. There are no mitigating factors, but several aggravating ones. The propaganda campaign for that war, based on known lies and fabrications about weapons of mass destruction and a supposed alliance between mortal enemies Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. His intention to invade Iraq — previously expressed in the quest for world domination of the “Project for a New American Century” — was expressed at 2:40 pm on September 11, 2001. “Hit Saddam... Go Massive” he said. So the supreme international crime perhaps finds its genesis in him — perhaps, even, than in any other individual — and his actions, intentional and deliberate, unleashed the maelstrom of fire, carnage, charred bodies and unbearable suffering that continues to rend Iraq. A peer-reviewed study in the *Lancet* in October 2006 estimated the the number of deaths as a result of the war at 650,000; the British research polling agency, Opinion Research Business, has since extrapolated a figure of 1.2 million; in addition, the number of refugees is estimated at 4 million. In comparison to these consequences, Rumsfeld’s policy of torture seems positively sedate; and academic questions and freedom of speech are long forgotten.

So that is the situation. And he is here at Stanford: he has been appointed as a “distinguished visiting fellow” at the Hoover Institution. It is up to the Stanford community to do something about it.