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Why it will Take so Long to Win - The War on Terror

A speech by Donald Rumsfeld shows that the administration still doesn't get it

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IN A century's time historians may well ponder why it took America so long to win the war on terror, especially given that the world's foremost democracy was battling against opponents who would rather have dragged society back to the Dark Ages. If so, they may well find part of the answer in a speech Donald Rumsfeld gave last week on the role of the media at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

In one way, the speech marked a step forward for the defence secretary, because it concentrated on the need to win "hearts and minds". Until recently he plainly regarded such a focus on "soft power" as, well, soft—part of "Old Europe's" appeasement of terrorism. No matter that his generals, allies and counter-insurgency manuals told him that it was impossible to defeat fanaticism without changing public opinion; the master of military transformation would "drain the swamp" in Iraq (and the wider Muslim world) through superior firepower, high-tech intelligence and incarceration. When people—even trenchant supporters of America, like this newspaper—harped on about such details as due process, the Geneva Conventions or the importance of explaining his policies personally to critics, it was proof of our weak-mindedness.

Now something—was it, one wonders, Abu Ghraib? Or Guantánamo? Or the torture memos? Or the fact that China now lectures America on human rights? Or the tragic decline in sympathy for America around the world?—seems to have prompted a meagre mental adjustment on Mr Rumsfeld's part. His recent Quadrennial Defence Review confessed that "victory in the long war depends on strategic communication" and even issued a plea for "considerably improved language and cultural awareness". His speech in New York was an attempt to flesh out this strategy. Yet it ended up illustrating how completely the defence secretary still fails to "get it".

Mr Rumsfeld's thesis was that al-Qaeda and other extremist groups had managed to poison the Muslim public's view of the West by somehow "out-communicating" America. A group of fanatics, whose leaders live in caves and dare not use cellular phones, has apparently been much better at mastering the modern internet age than the most sophisticated government in the world. A good part of his speech was focused on how with slicker PR America could win the propaganda war: there would be more media training for military personnel, 24-hour media operation centres, and so on.

In narrow terms, these prescriptions make sense. More controversial were Mr Rumsfeld's swipes at the media. He grumbled that the mockery of journalists had mucked up his crass scheme to pay for articles to be placed in Iraqi newspapers; that they jeopardised security (in a television interview, he claimed that al-Qaeda people had been tipped off by the disclosure that their phone calls could be listened to); and above all that his critics did not play fair, giving more space to America's transgressions (like Abu Ghraib) than to those of its enemies (such as Saddam Hussein's mass graves).

Some journalism is indeed indefensible: witness the disgustingly anti-American and especially anti-Semitic fare in many Arabic television stations and newspapers. And Mr Rumsfeld has every right to point out that the western press makes mistakes—though some of them are at his bidding. He correctly attacked American TV networks for not showing pictures of Saddam's abuses. But they were also wrong to hide some pictures of American abuses at Abu Ghraib—which have now emerged on Australian television, sparking off fresh problems in the Muslim world.

The most unnerving thing about Mr Rumsfeld's remarks is that he still seems to think that winning hearts and minds is just a question of better presentation. But no amount of spin will make locking people up indefinitely without trial at Guantánamo Bay look compatible with American principles of justice. Mr Rumsfeld retorts that 15 detainees who had been released went back to the battlefield to try to kill Americans. A sad statistic, but a lot more than 15 hearts and minds are turned against America every day Guantánamo stays open. And exactly the same argument goes for the Bush administration's insane attempts to reserve the right to torture people.

These arguments have gone well past points of principle; they are to do with the hard pragmatic task of grinding out a victory against a relentless enemy. In its great struggle against Soviet communism—a far more potent foe than Islamist extremism—America stood firmly on the side of human rights and freedom. Unless it stands credibly on that side again, winning this fight will take far longer than it should do.