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Telluride Film Review: 'The Unknown Known'



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Errol Morris goes mano-a-mano with Donald Rumsfeld in this coolly hypnotic conceptual sequel to 'The Fog of War.'

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Errol Morris (<http://variety.com/t/errol-morris/>) goes mano-a-mano with former U.S. Defense Secretary **Donald Rumsfeld** (<http://variety.com/t/donald-rumsfeld/>) and emerges with something of a draw in “**The Unknown Known** (<http://variety.com/t/the-unknown-known/>),” a coolly hypnotic conceptual sequel to Morris’ Oscar-winning Robert McNamara study, “The Fog of War,” by way of 2008’s Abu Ghraib docu “Standard Operating Procedure.” Ranging over familiar material, but made vivid by Morris’ fecund associations and invigorating stylistic flourishes (including a superb Danny Elfman score), this as-yet undated release from Weinstein Co. “boutique” label Radius will face audience Iraq fatigue at the theatrical box office (where “Fog” grossed an impressive \$4 million domestically), but should attract plenty of curiosity seekers on VOD and during its eventual broadcast premiere via co-producer the History Channel.

Seated before Morris’ patented “Interrotron” camera in natty navy suit, crisp blue oxford and striped tie, Rumsfeld looks primed for battle and proves, throughout, to be a more combative, less revealing subject than his predecessor, drunk on ego and unflappable in the face of

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gen contradiction. And, as demonstrated by many a Pentagon press briefing, he once again proves a master of convoluted rhetoric of the sort that gives pic its title, Rumspeak for “things that you think you know that it turns out you did not.”

So it’s no surprise that Rumsfeld’s obsessive memo writing — more than 20,000 during his six years in the Bush administration alone — becomes Morris’ primary visual and structural motif, Kafkaesque stacks of file folders stretching toward infinity (care of production designers Jeremy Landman and Ted Bafaloukos) while the former secretary himself reads many of said memos — or “snowflakes” — aloud onscreen. Morris begins with one such snowflake, from July 2001, in which Rumsfeld addresses Condoleezza Rice with his concerns about the national security threats posed by Iraq, then proceeds chronologically through Sept. 11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. At one point, Morris questions Rumsfeld about his contribution to public confusion about Iraq’s connection to Al Qaeda, to which his subject merely says, “Oh, I don’t think so” and flashes his insidious, Cheshire-cat grin.

“The Unknown Known” then dovetails back to the early days of Rumsfeld’s career to trace his meteoric ascent through the ranks of U.S. government, crafting a portrait of a nakedly ambitious careerist with an uncanny gift for smelling which way the wind was blowing and making due haste. After four short terms in the House of Representatives, he served various positions in the Nixon cabinet, emerging unscathed from the Watergate affair (excerpts from Nixon’s Oval Office audio tapes find the President questioning whether Rumsfeld is the sort of sailor who’ll go down with the ship).

He then joined the Ford cabinet, first as chief of staff and later as secretary of defense — at 43, the youngest in U.S. history. That Rumsfeld harbored his own presidential (or at least vice presidential) ambitions seems clear, coming close when Ronald Reagan was seeking a running mate in 1980. But in one of the few cases where luck wasn’t on Rumsfeld’s side, he found himself bypassed in favor of an old foe from the Ford years, George H.W. Bush, who had accused Rumsfeld of shunting him off to head the CIA in an effort to curb his own political ambitions.

When the docu catches back up to Iraq, Morris and Rumsfeld parry the topics of “torture memos,” “enhanced interrogations” and WMDs to little avail, the latter retaining his Sphinx-like demeanor even when Morris catches him in a boldfaced lie about the migration of certain interrogation tactics from Guantanamo Bay to detention centers in the Middle East. On the subject of Abu Ghraib, he allows only that “something terrible happened on my watch” and that he twice unsuccessfully offered President Bush his resignation.

Because of their similar CVs — chiefly, as the architects of unpopular foreign wars — it’s impossible not to compare Rumsfeld to McNamara and, in turn, “The Unknown Known” to “The Fog of War.” It’s a comparison this film implicitly invites, and the diptych may in fact be more revealing than either one on its own. Though McNamara never exactly appeared contrite before Morris’ lens, he did bear the weary countenance of a man who had seen too much and needed to unload. Rumsfeld, by contrast, seems altogether incapable of reflection, self-directed or otherwise. When Morris asks him why he agreed to participate in the film in the first place, he sidesteps, but it’s obvious that he’s a firm believer in the maxim that there’s no such thing as

hospital, they're in hisakabl crocodile tears.



Taken collectively, McNamara and Rumsfeld are signposts on the long and winding road of modern American geopolitics, as it veers from men of real vision (for good or ill), forged by the Great Depression and the New Deal, to professional bureaucrats hopelessly in love with the sound of their own voices. Not for nothing is Morris’ most indelible image here that of a vast canvas of gently lapping waves suddenly transformed into a literal ocean of words.

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Reviewed at Telluride Film Festival, Sept. 1, 2013. (Also in Venice Film Festival — competing; Toronto Film Festival — TIFF Docs.) Running time: **102 MIN.**

Production

(Documentary) A Radius-TWC release presented with History Films and Participant Media in association with Sky Atlantic of a Moxie Pictures production. Produced by Errol Morris, Amanda Branson Gill, Robert Fernandez. Executive producers, Molly Thompson, Dirk Hoogstra, Julian P. Hobbs, Tom Quinn, Jason Janego, Josh Braun, Jeff Skoll, Diane Weyermann, Celia Taylor, Angus Wall, Julia Sheehan. Co-producer, Ann Petrone.

Crew

Directed by Errol Morris. Camera (color, HD, widescreen), Robert Chappell; editor, Steven Hathaway; music, Danny Elfman; production designers, Jeremy Landman, Ted Bafaloukos; art director, Eugenia Magann Haynes; set decorator, Melissa Cooperman; sound (Dolby Digital), Steve Bores, G. John Garrett; sound designer, Joel Dougherty; supervising sound editor, Skip Lievsay; re-recording mixers, Skip Lievsay, Joel Dougherty; visual effects supervisor, Andy McKenna; visual effects, Elastic; associate producers, Zach Arnold, James Maxwell Larkin, Joshua Kearney; assistant director, Matt O’Shea.

With

Donald Rumsfeld, Errol Morris.