

by Bill Berkowitz

MSNBC talk show host takes on Rumsfeld and his reckless appeasement rhetoric

On Wednesday, August 30, MSNBC's Keith Olberman, had his Edward R. Morrow moment and he made the most of it. In a hard-hitting and thoughtful six-minute commentary, Olberman, the host of "Countdown," responded to a new campaign launched by the Bush Administration branding opponents of the war in Iraq as appeasers and confused enablers of terrorism.

With the war in Iraq droning on, an exit strategy still a mystery, the president's poll numbers in the tank, the war on terrorism in disarray, and the continued Republican control of Congress threatened, Team Bush rolled out its old and time-tested "the Democrats are weak on terrorism" campaign.

In successive days at the end of August, while President Bush appearing to be staying above the fray, administration spokespersons led by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and aided and abetted by Vice President Dick Cheney, cranked up the volume.

No longer satisfied with merely insinuating that critics of the war in Iraq and the president's war on terrorism are anti-patriotic and threatening the morale of the troops in the field, Rumsfeld lashed out at war critics for being weak on terrorism and appeasers of fascism.

Speaking at the American Legion's annual convention in Salt Lake City, Utah, on Tuesday, August 29, Rumsfeld drew parallels between the current conflict with terrorists and the period between World Wars I and II, the Associated Press reported.

"It was a time when a certain amount of cynicism and moral confusion set in among western democracies, when those who warned about a coming crisis, the rise of fascism and Nazism, they were ridiculed or ignored," said Rumsfeld.

"With the growing lethality and the increasing availability of weapons, can we truly afford to believe that somehow, some way, vicious extremists can be appeased?" Rumsfeld asked.

Rumsfeld said "any kind of moral or intellectual confusion about who and what is right or wrong can weaken the ability of free societies to persevere" in any long war.

Rep. Pete Stark (D-CA) summed up the Democratâ€™s response by saying that Rumsfeld was â€œDesperate to divert attention from his many failures as Defense Secretary, [and] resorting to tactics that would make Joe McCarthy proud."

Pentagon press secretary Eric Ruff denied that Rumsfeld was â€œaccusing critics of this administration of being soft on terrorism or anything of that sort."

"The point of the speech," Ruff said, "was to raise these questions, and at the same time to remind us that ... it's not in America's best interest to turn your back on history. And the lessons of the '30s are pretty clear."

Fifty-two years ago, at the height of the Cold War, CBS television aired what some critics have called the most influential news program in U.S. television history. Edward R. Murrow, a trusted and veteran CBS reporter, took on Wisconsin Republican Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's infamous campaign to root out so-called unpatriotic Americans from public service.

In the early 1950s, McCarthy and his minions irresponsibly hurled charges that Communists had infiltrated the U.S. government before, during, and after World War II. McCarthy and his gang of self-righteous "patriots" trained their guns on government employees as well as the creative community "writers, directors, and actors working in Hollywood and on Broadway" in addition to public school teachers and academics on college campuses across the country.

The hysteria stirred up by mostly unsubstantiated charges caused thousands to lose their jobs, and some, to commit suicide.

More than fifty years later, Rumsfeld picked up McCarthy's baton, stirring up his own brand of fear and loathing; fear amongst the American public that a Congress controlled by Democrats would lead to another terrorist attack on the homeland, and loathing for those that dared criticize Bush's war in Iraq and war on terrorism.

MSNBC's Keith Olbermann, however, was having none of it. He opened his commentary by declaring that "The man who sees absolutes, where all other men see nuances and shades of meaning, is either a prophet, or a quack. Donald H. Rumsfeld is not a prophet."

L. Brent Bozell's Media Research Center characterized Olbermann's commentary as "a rant," "a vitriolic personal attack" and a "diatribe" against Rumsfeld.

Olbermann pointed out that Rumsfeld's remarks "demands deep analysis -- and the sober contemplation -- of every American," because "it did not merely serve to impugn the morality or intelligence -- indeed, the loyalty -- of the majority of Americans who oppose the transient occupants of the highest offices in the land."

Olbermann maintained that "dissent and disagreement with government is the life's blood of human freedom," and that it was absolutely "essential". Because just every once in awhile it is right and the power to which it speaks, is wrong.

Rumsfeld got it completely wrong by comparing today's critics of the war in Iraq with the appeasement of Hitler before World War II, Olbermann said. He was turning history on its head, he pointed out:

§ In a small irony, however, Mr. Rumsfeld's speechwriter was adroit in invoking the memory of the appeasement of the Nazis. For in their time, there was another government faced with true peril -- with a growing evil -- powerful and remorseless.

§ That government, like Mr. Rumsfeld's, had a monopoly on all the facts. It, too, had the "secret information." It alone had the true picture of the threat. It too dismissed and insulted its critics in terms like Mr. Rumsfeld's -- questioning their intellect and their morality.

Â§ That government was England's, in the 1930's.

Â§ It knew Hitler posed no true threat to Europe, let alone England.

Â§ It knew Germany was not re-arming, in violation of all treaties and accords.

Â§ It knew that the hard evidence it received, which contradicted its own policies, its own conclusions -- its own omniscience -- needed to be dismissed.

Â§ The English government of Neville Chamberlain already knew the truth.

Â§ Most relevant of all -- it "knew" that its staunchest critics needed to be marginalized and isolated. In fact, it portrayed the foremost of them as a blood-thirsty war-monger who was, if not truly senile, at best morally or intellectually confused.

Â§ That critic's name was Winston Churchill.

Rumsfeld's analogy failed precisely because it was Chamberlain that had his certainty -- and his

own confusion,â€• a confusion that led him to design his own construct and stick to it regardless of the facts. â€œRumsfeld,â€• declared Olbermann, made â€œan apt historical analogy â€œ. Excepting â€œthat he has the battery plugged in backwards.â€•

The Bush Administrationâ€™s credibility has been severely damaged by incompetence and a series of miscalculations and an intractable unwillingness to acknowledge mistakes and change course. "To date, this government has proved little besides its own arrogance, and its own hubris.â€•

Rumsfeld, Cheney and the president himself have continued to create a â€œâ€™Fog of Fearâ€™ which continues to envelop this nation,â€• and they â€œand their cronies have -- inadvertently or intentionally -- profited and benefited, both personally, and politically.â€•

Ironically, the Bush Administration is â€œin fact now accomplishing what they claim the terrorists seek: The destruction of our freedoms.â€• And, Olbermann added, while Rumsfeld was correct in warning that this country faces a "new type of fascism," he need only look in the mirror to see its genesis.

Olbermann ended his commentary by quoting the final words of Edward R. Murrow's historic 1954 broadcast:

We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. We must remember always that accusation is not proof, and that conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law.

We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men, not from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate, and to defend causes that were for the moment unpopular.

Photo of Mr. Berkowitz by Earl Richardson

Keith Olbermann's Finest Hour by Bill_Berkowitz