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COUNTDOWN for May 4, 2006

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GUESTS: Richard Wolffe, Michael Musto

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HIGHLIGHT: Which of these stories will you be talking about tomorrow?

KEITH OLBERMANN, HOST: Which of these stories will you be talking about tomorrow?

The wrath of public political protest, now against the secretary of defense.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

RAY **MCGOVERN:** Why did you lie to get us into a war that was not necessary?

DONALD **RUMSFELD**, SECRETARY OF DEFENSE: I'm not in the intelligence business. They gave us the world their honest opinion. It appears that there were not weapons of mass destruction.

MCGOVERN: You said you knew where they were.

RUMSFELD: I did not. I said I knew where suspect sites were.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

OLBERMANN: No, he literally said he knew where they were.

Protesters in Atlanta, including that former CIA analyst, cut **Rumsfeld** to ribbons today, using only his own words. The political gloves have come off.

What came off in the Duke Cunningham scandal? Poker games? Strip poker? We'll have the latest.

Zacarias Moussaoui gets not just a life sentence but his comeuppance. "It's absolutely clear who won," says the judge. "You came here to be a martyr in a great big bang of glory. Instead, you will die with a whimper." How about locking him in a room with David Blaine? Enough.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I don't think he's all there.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I want to know what his childhood was like.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

OLBERMANN: No. No, you don't.

You want to know why Britney Spears held a news conference in L.A.? Well, you can't, because it never happened, so we didn't get to ask her, Have you really hired a baby sitter for your husband? How about a car seat?

All that and more, now on COUNTDOWN.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Now, shall we get on with it?

(END VIDEO CLIP)

OLBERMANN: Good evening.

There have been many explanations offered for why, in one of the times of the greatest political turbulence in American history, there has been comparative apathy in places that have been past venues for public protest. One answer, that the administration has been outstanding in cherry-picking not just intelligence but also the makeup of the crowds that greet or interact with its key players.

Our fifth story on the COUNTDOWN, that latter component, the governmental equivalent of the Cone of Silence from the old TV series "Get Smart," this afternoon broke down again, for the second time in six days.

First, the president's lambasting by Stephen Colbert at the White House Correspondents Dinner, and now, today's vivisection of Defense Secretary **Rumsfeld**, with only **Rumsfeld's** own words as weapons, at a speech in Atlanta, one of several interchanges with critics, in this case a former CIA analyst, lasting four minutes.

Here it is in its entirety, with fact-checks.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MCGOVERN: I'm Ray **McGovern**, a 27-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency and co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.

I would like to compliment you on your observation that lies are fundamentally destructive of the trust that government needs to govern. A colleague of mine, Paul Pillar, who is the top agency analyst on the Middle East and on counterterrorism, accused you and your colleagues of an organized campaign of manipulation, quote. I suppose by some definitions--

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Could you get to your question please?

MCGOVERN: --that could be called a lie.

Atlanta, September 27, 2002, Donald **Rumsfeld** said, and I quote--

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: (INAUDIBLE)--

MCGOVERN: --"**There is bulletproof evidence** of links between al Qaeda and the government of President Saddam Hussein." Was that a lie, Mr. **Rumsfeld**? Or was that manufactured somewhere else? Because all of my CIA colleagues disputed that, and so did the 9/11 commission.

And so I would like to ask you to be up front with the American people. Why did you lie to get us into a war that was not necessary, and that has caused these kinds of casualties? Why?

RUMSFELD: Well, first of all, I haven't lied. I did not lie then.

Colin Powell didn't lie. He spent weeks and weeks with the Central Intelligence Agency people and prepared a presentation that I know he believed was accurate. And he presented that to the United Nations.

The president spent weeks and weeks with the Central Intelligence people, and he went to

the American people and made a presentation.

I'm not in the intelligence business. They gave the world their honest opinion. It appears that there were not weapons of mass destruction there.

MCGOVERN: You said you knew where they were.

RUMSFELD: I did not. I said I knew where suspect sites were, and we were--

MCGOVERN: You said--

RUMSFELD: --just a minute--

MCGOVERN: --you said you knew where there were, near Tikrit, near Baghdad, and northeast, south, and west of there. Those are your words.

RUMSFELD: My words, my words were that-- No, no, no, wait a minute, wait a minute. Let him stay one second. Just a second.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

OLBERMANN: Just as second indeed. **Rumsfeld's** words about WMD, March 30, 2003, on ABC's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos were, quote, "We know where they are. They're in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad, and east, west, south, and north somewhat."

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MCGOVERN: This is America, huh?

RUMSFELD: You're getting plenty of play, sir.

MCGOVERN: I'd just like an honest answer.

RUMSFELD: I'm giving it to you.

MCGOVERN: We're talking about lies, and your allegation that there was **bulletproof evidence** of ties between al Qaeda and Iraq.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

OLBERMANN: Did **Rumsfeld** make that allegation? Indeed, he did. September 27, 2002, to the Chamber of Commerce right there in Atlanta, quoting, "We ended up with five or six sentences that were bulletproof. We could say them. They're factual. They're exactly accurate. They demonstrate that there are, in fact, al Qaeda in Iraq. But they're not photographs, they're not beyond a reasonable doubt."

Still, Mr. **Rumsfeld** again had to face his own words quoted back to him. How to do that? Change the subject.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MCGOVERN: Was that a lie? Or were you misled?

RUMSFELD: Zarqawi was in Baghdad during the prewar period. That is a fact.

MCGOVERN: Zarqawi? He was in the north of Iraq in a place where Saddam Hussein had no rule. That's where he was.

RUMSFELD: He was also in Baghdad.

MCGOVERN: Yes, when he needed to go to the hospital.

Come on, these people aren't idiots. They know the story.

RUMSFELD: You are-- Let me give you an example. It's easy for you to make a charge. But why do you think that the men and women in uniform every day, when they came out of Kuwait and went into Iraq, put on chemical weapon protective suits? Because they liked the style? They honestly believed that there were chemical weapons.

Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons on his own people previously. He'd used them on his neighbor, the Iranians. And they believed he had those weapons. We believed he had those weapons.

MCGOVERN: That's what we call a non sequitur. It doesn't matter what the troops believed. It matters what you believed.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I think, Mr. Secretary, the debate is over. We have other questions, in courtesy to your audience.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

OLBERMANN: In the aftermath of that, let's take the political temperature with "Newsweek"'s White House correspondent, Richard Wolffe.

Richard, good evening.

RICHARD WOLFFE, WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT, "NEWSWEEK"

MAGAZINE: Keith, good evening.

OLBERMANN: In the parlance of sports, Mr. **Rumsfeld** got faced this afternoon, pasteurized (ph), forced to deny his own words. Was that a make-or-break moment, both for him and his critics?

WOLFFE: Well, **Rumsfeld** will survive this. I mean, look, if he can survive a war that's gone the way it's gone, then he can survive some rough questioning.

But a couple of things are interesting here, not just the discrepancy between what he said and what he's previously said. But, you know, the dynamic in the Pentagon briefings is much more jokey. Don **Rumsfeld** can play the matinee star, as the president likes to call him, and get away with it.

He couldn't do that here. And I think we saw that when he was questioned by the troops in Kuwait about armor, and what you are seeing here is-- I mean, there's so many levels of disingenuousness.

He says he's not in the intelligence business. Well, of course the Defense Department is in the intelligence business. I mean, it has a big intelligence community of its own, and it was gathering its own case about al Qaeda in Iraq, which it handed to Colin Powell. The way he hides behind Colin Powell, I think, will bring a wry chuckle to the face of the former secretary of state.

OLBERMANN: Not in the intelligence business might have been a Freudian slip more than an accurate description. But when somebody goes out there blithely denies that they said such-and-such a thing, and the exact thing is on tape and on the public record, how can that not result in some kind of political fallout or even disaster? I mean, charitably, it's dementia, and not charitably, it's lying.

WOLFFE: Yes, absolutely. But, you know, he can't claim the dementia defense. I think in another part of the questioning, he cited with perfect recall a "New York Times" headline from 2001. So it's going to be tough for him to say he's just an old guy.

And, look, there is pattern of behavior here among the people who pushed the case hardest when it came to the run-up to war. I mean, Dick Cheney went in the vice presidential debate and said he'd suggested no link between Iraq and al Qaeda, and yet there were all those tapes from "MEET THE PRESS" suggesting completely the opposite. So we've seen this before, and I'm afraid those people survive.

OLBERMANN: What happened to the portable bubble defense for the administration? Obviously we had Saturday and Stephen Colbert at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, then there was this Ray **McGovern**, the woman with the war crimes banner who was carried out. There were at least three other hecklers. What happened to the prescreening of dissenters? Or (INAUDIBLE) they now in a situation where they just don't have enough people who are still buying this stuff to fill up a hall with them?

WOLFFE: Well, it's like the president said, why can't he speak to the 30 percent of the people who like him? You know, there just aren't enough people out there right now. And, of course, the administration, to their credit, recognize that they have to reach out beyond their base, and try and get into real-life situations. But real-life situations puts them there with people who are critical.

And, you know, I mean, you can run, but you can't hide. These questions are out there. Public opinion has pretty much turned on the case for war and on the justification for war. And you can't escape it.

OLBERMANN: Was this event ultimately, or is it too early to judge whether this might be a tipping point? Because, I mean, even a year ago, this would have gotten cursory coverage in most places. Tonight, this was the lead story on two of the three network evening newscasts, ahead of the Moussaoui sentencing.

WOLFFE: You know, I think it's just the look on **Rumsfeld's** face, it's that unsettling thing, as if he wasn't prepared for a hostile question like that. You know, it's a moment for **Rumsfeld** to actually face up to things. And I think that's the moment for him. It's not what the president does, it's when reality strikes like that.

OLBERMANN: Richard Wolffe, White House correspondent at "Newsweek" magazine. As ever, great thanks for joining us tonight.

WOLFFE: Any time.

OLBERMANN: If the long afternoon for Donald **Rumsfeld** 2006 at the hands of the words of Donald **Rumsfeld** 2003 and Donald **Rumsfeld** 2002 is indeed a political tipping point, as it might seem, one part of the body politic will be screaming. It's about bloody time-- the Internet, where a little goes a long way, and an issue not necessarily at the front of the collective American mind can be turned into a blunt object that can be repeatedly hit over the collective American head.

Ask Stephen Colbert. Ask our correspondent, Dawn Fratangelo.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

DAWN FRATANGELO, MSNBC CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): They are the New Age opinion page, Internet blogs, written by big names and no names. And this week, they even had the White House on the defensive about this.

GEORGE W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Because I think the National Anthem ought to be sung in English.

FRATANGELO: Bloggers pointed out that a book claims Mr. Bush once sang the anthem in Spanish. The White House responded, it was absurd.

Then there's comedian Stephen Colbert.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

STEPHEN COLBERT, "THE COLBERT REPORT": So don't pay attention to the approval ratings that say that 68 percent of Americans disapprove of the job this man is doing. I ask you this, does that not also logically mean that 68 percent approve of the job he's not doing?

(END VIDEO CLIP)

FRATANGELO: His roasting of the president this weekend got nearly 70,000 posts on blogs, the most of any subject today.

Comedian Harry Shearer writes a daily blog.

HARRY SHEARER, COMEDIAN: That you can see that footage of Stephen everywhere has served to be a kind of a wakeup call, that, Wait a minute, it is-- we're still a country

where it's OK to say these things about the president? Whew! God, that's a relief.

FRATANGELO: What started as lonely voices from laptops are a growing influence on the mainstream media. Most every news outlet, including our own, now has a blog.

GLENN REYNOLDS, INSTAPUNDIT.COM: It used to be a few gatekeepers at the top decided what the topics of the national conversation were going to be. Now it bubbles up from the bottom, from thousands or even millions of blogs.

FRATANGELO: The voice of the Everyman, growing louder, and being heard everywhere.

Dawn Fratangelo, NBC News, New York.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

OLBERMANN: Also tonight, allegations of special treatment for a member of the Kennedy clan. The Representative Patrick Kennedy in a bizarre car crash in the middle of the night on Capitol Hill. Authorities let him go without conducting a sobriety test.

They will be testing more than sobriety in what we might call Watergate-gate. The latest on the Duke Cunningham scandal. Money and prostitutes, and cooperation from Cunningham, coming up from investigative correspondent Lisa Myers.

You are watching COUNTDOWN on MSNBC.

OLBERMANN: The only things unerringly true about politics are that corruption is bipartisan, and that nobody ever, ever learns from history.

Our fourth story on the COUNTDOWN, tonight, a politician named Kennedy in trouble after a car crash, and a burgeoning scandal wafting out of the halls of the Watergate complex.

According to the police union of Washington, D.C., Congressman Patrick Kennedy appeared to be driving under the influence the wee hours of this morning. He first hit a curb, then nearly hit a Capitol police car. The officer in that patrol car switched on his siren and gave chase. Kennedy then allegedly crashed into a barricade, staggered out of his car, declared that he was a member of Congress and was late for a vote.

He got that right. It was nearly 3:00 a.m. Congress had been out of session for hours.

According to the police union, senior Capitol police officers then took over the case and, without performing a field sobriety test, they drove the congressman home. That police union now calling for a full investigation into why its lower-level officers were not allowed to finish an investigation. Response from Congressman Kennedy, he says he was not drunk, and he will fully cooperate in any inquiry.

And tonight, it appears Congressman Randy "Duke" Cunningham is also cooperating in the investigation that landed him in jail, centered in an almost impossible repeat of history, at the Watergate Hotel.

Senior investigative correspondent Lisa Myers reports tonight that the dots have yet to be connected, but evidently, with Cunningham's help, the FBI sure is trying.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

LISA MYERS, MSNBC CHIEF INVESTIGATIVE CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): The infamous Watergate Hotel, again at the center of political intrigue.

JOSH GRAHAM, ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER, WATERGATE HOTEL: We have received subpoenas for documents, we have complied.

MYERS: FBI agents are investigating what happened in the hotel's posh suites, which this defense contractor, Brent Wilkes, turned into party suites for politicians and CIA officers.

There was poker and cigars, and the FBI wants to know if there were prostitutes too. (on camera): It's all part of a growing investigation into corruption in defense and intelligence contracts, which already has sent one congressman to prison, and, legal sources say, may threaten others in Congress and the CIA.

ROBERTA BASKIN, CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY: (INAUDIBLE) sex, spies, money, entertainment. It's classic Washington scandal.

MYERS (voice-over): At the center of the investigation is the defense contractor Wilkes, a lifelong friend of this man, the number-three official at the CIA, Hile Dusty Foggo (ph), who's in charge of agency contracts. Foggo acknowledges attending some of Wilkes' poker games, but vehemently denies there were any prostitutes.

The CIA is now investigating whether Foggo improperly helped Wilkes get a \$2.4 million contract. Foggo denies any wrongdoing. Also playing poker, former congressman Duke Cunningham, who recently pleaded guilty to accepting bribes from four co-conspirators, including Wilkes, who has not been charged.

REP. RANDY "DUKE" CUNNINGHAM (R): And now I know great shame.

MYERS: Sources close to the investigation say a former associate of Wilkes has told prosecutors that Wilkes provided prostitutes to Cunningham. Wilkes strongly denies any wrongdoing. Cunningham's lawyer had no comment.

The FBI has questioned this company, Sherlington Limousine, about whether it arranged prostitutes for Cunningham or any other member of Congress. The company denies any involvement with prostitutes.

CHARLIE WILSON, FORMER CONGRESSMAN: So the nearest to lawbreaking I saw when I was there was that they were smoking all these cigars on a no-smoking floor.

MYERS: Former congressman Charlie Wilson says he played poker at the Watergate suite a few times.

WILSON: It was just an ordinary stag poker game, a lot of cigar smoke, lot of whiskey.

MYERS: But Cunningham is now cooperating with the FBI, raising the stakes for former partners and colleagues.

Lisa Myers, NBC News, Washington.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

OLBERMANN: Far more moving drama near the nation's capital today, the tension in the courtroom as Zacarias Moussaoui was officially sentenced, his latest diatribe obscured by the anger from the families, and even from the judge herself.

And the daily dance of the nation's highways between the good guys and the bad guys. Guess which one he is? Warm up the Oddball scoreboard ding.

COUNTDOWN continues.

OLBERMANN: In retrospect, it seems that as if we were all taught it on the first day of elementary school. Three hundred and eighty years ago today, Peter Minuit and the Dutch East India Company bought the island of Manhattan for \$24 worth of cloth and buttons from the natives. Long ago, it used to be couched in pride, clever Peter Minuit. Nowadays, it's mentioned with guilt, politically incorrect Peter Minuit, even though the \$24 figure was recently recalculated into its 2006 value, \$72. Well, that's better.

On that note, let's play Oddball.

We begin in Oklahoma City with the COUNTDOWN Car Chase of the Week. Let's go to Chopper 4 now. And ask yourself, why would someone drive such a nice new pickup truck like this? Because he stole it, that's why. And now this guy won't pull over. Can

you believe it? Checking the Oddball scoreboard for the year, we can see no one ever gets away. It's cops 27, guys who try to escape the cops, nuttin.

But that does not stop this out-of-control desperado in a Silverado from tearing through suburban neighborhoods at breakneck speeds, not until his front tire and the road runs out, before the car chase is over and the foot chase begins. And look at him run. Right into the nearby Shepard's (ph) Mall, ironically, the same place where he bought that undershirt.

After a bit of window shopping and an Orange Julius, this mall rat is in handcuffs, and a police car is on the way to the Big House.

Here's a goat at an elementary school in Plano, Texas. Either he sees his reflection in the window pane of that door, or he wants a taste of the best Salisbury steak in the north Texas school district, because he's ramming the glass repeatedly, trying to get in. I'm late for history. I'm late for history, and you're talking about Peter Minuit.

He eventually did get in and roamed the halls of the school for a while, and solved an extremely difficult math problem that was left on a chalkboard. For some reason, we don't have any of that on tape. Just take my word for it, all right?

We're taking somebody's word on this. The terror leader in Iraq needing to learn lesson number one about self-promotion. Don't leave the blooper reel lying around for everyone to see.

Speaking of everything to see, am I supposed to boil him in that like a big bag of vegetables? If I shake it, will it pretend to snow in there?

Those stories ahead.

But now, here are COUNTDOWN's top three newsmakers of this day.

Number three, more than 3,000 new mothers are crowded into a sports stadium in Manila in the Philippines in an attempt to break the world record for largest mass breast-feeding. They were in a sports stadium, so I hope somebody chanted, You suck.

Number two, I'm not sure if I believe this one, but a Hungarian online magazine reports that two workers remodeling a house in Zagreb (ph) found an unclaimed barrel of rum. They promptly drank it. They emptied the barrel, but the thing was still phenomenally heavy. That's when, according to the story, they discovered the pickled corpse at the bottom. It was said to be the deceased owner of the house, who had died in Jamaica and was shipped back to Hungary 20 years ago in the barrel of rum by his wife, who wanted to avoid all the nasty paperwork.

The workers were said to have noticed the rum's special taste. Bottom of the barrel.

And number one, the managers at the Duane Reade drugstore on New York's West 34th Street. There is a new sign explaining what's available on Aisle 8 that reads, "Laxatives, Antacids, Vaporizes." We think they mean "Vaporizers," but what if they don't? Cleanup on Aisle 8. Well, why? There's nothing left of the guy.

OLBERMANN: It is the oft quoted comment from a newspaper editorial the day after four the eight conspirators in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln were hanged. In our time there is only the one man and there is every reason to suspect he was a delusional hanger on who needed to rationalize a hapless existence by claiming more involvement in 9/11 than he could have ever handled. But after the formal sentencing of Zacarias Moussaoui, still that quotation from 1865 seems to resonate. Directed to him and the others far more involved. We want to know their names no more.

Our third story on the COUNTDOWN, Moussaoui to jail for life and Moussaoui's latest

rant upstaged by a judge whose voice rose in righteous indignation. Our justice correspondent Pete Williams was at the Virginia courthouse for the sentencing and again joins us from the Washington bureau with the extraordinary details. Pete?

PETE WILLIAMS, NBC NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Keith Zacarias Moussaoui today in court spoke what are probably the last words that will ever be heard from him in public. But he said them only after some of the 9/11 families addressed him directly in court.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

WILLIAMS: For three relatives of people killed on 9/11 it was suddenly their turn. Rosemary Dillard stood just 15 feet from Moussaoui, looked him squarely in the eye and said, "I want you to know how you wrecked my life. I hope that you sit in that jail without any contact with the world. For you I feel nothing but disgust." Abraham Scott told him, "I look forward to bringing Bin Laden to justice in this courtroom. I'm hoping and praying that will be put to death." And Lisa Dolan had just one message for Moussaoui, "There is still one final judgment day." Confronting Moussaoui they said was important.

ABRAHAM SCOTT, WIDOWER OF 9/11 VICTIM: It was extremely hard for me sitting in that courtroom listening to him without jumping across that little fence and doing bodily harm to him.

WILLIAMS: Allowed to speak as federal rules require, Moussaoui responded, "You have an amount of hypocrisy which is beyond any belief. Your humanity is very selective. Only you suffer, only you feel. God curse America and save Osama Bin Laden. You'll never get him." In sentencing Moussaoui to life without parole Judge Leonie Brinkema paraphrased the poet T.S. Elliott. "You came here to be a martyr and to die in a great big bang of glory," she said. "Instead, you will die with a whimper." Some 9/11 family members said it's time now to move on.

PEG OGWONSKI, WIDOW OF 9/11 VICTIM: We can now forget Zacarias Moussaoui, a man who has produced nothing. He should be put away and forgotten.

WILLIAMS: Other relatives said the court proceedings were restrained.

MAUREEN SANTORA, MOTHER OF 9/11 VICTIM: Nobody insulted him publicly or called him a creep that was really what he was. They were very noble and just and fair.

WILLIAMS: As for the verdict the lead court appointed lawyer said Moussaoui was the prosecution's star witness but the jury didn't believe him.

EDWARD MACMAHON, DEFENSE LAWYER: He basically put himself at the right hand of Bin Laden even plotting the thing and it just was a preposterous story.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

WILLIAMS: Tonight Moussaoui is back where he's been for over four years in the Alexandria jail. But in just a few days federal marshals will take him to a maximum security prison in Colorado where he'll live out the rest of his life. Keith?

OLBERMANN: Our justice correspondent Pete Williams. Pete great thanks.

As for those terrorists still on the loose, not only the 9/11 plotters but the new breed of Al Qaeda in Iraq, apparently they are all currently engaged in some kind of power struggle. Although one of the terror chiefs Abu Musab Al Zarqawi evidently needs to work out some basics of self-promotion, such as never leave the unedited versions of your propaganda tapes lying around.

This is what he posted on the internet last week, what he wanted the world to see, a leader

fierce and fearless rallying his men with shows of strength and skill. But when U.S. forces stumbled upon the unedited version of the tape, they found this, a guy with a stopped-up machine gun seemingly unsure of what to do about the blockage. So clueless then one of his lackeys had to fix it for him. Which makes it even harder to understand why such a bummer would still be on the loose, or how we just happened to stumble on terrorist tape outtakes? And why as Andrea Mitchell reports, American intelligence believes Zarqawi is currently playing brinkmanship with Ayman Al Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

ANDREA MITCHELL, NBC NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Has the war on terror sparked another war, a battle to be the supreme leader of Al Qaeda? For the first time some analysts saw hints of a possible internal struggle in last week's flurry of tapes from Osama bin Laden, his deputy Ayman Al Zawahiri and Abu Musab Zarqawi, who calls himself the brains of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

EVEN KOHLMANN, MSNBC TERROR ANALYST: Certainly there is a competitive relationship between Zarqawi, Zawahiri and Bin Laden. And I think it would be correct to say that Zarqawi does seek to take away some of the glamour from Bin Laden for his own.

MITCHELL: Experts say the Al Qaeda leaders are using the tapes to try to prove they are still relevant. Zarqawi even took the unusual risk of appearing in the desert with his men and for the first time showing his face, a more personal appeal to potential followers. Before this Zarqawi wore a mask as in this video just before he beheaded American hostage Nicholas Berg.

DANIEL BYMAN, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY: This was a different appeal. This was saying I am leading the struggle I am responsible for the Americans being driven out. And that was a shift.

MITCHELL: One positive result of the increasing visibility of the Al Qaeda leaders, it could create new opportunities for U.S. intelligence to track them down, providing clues to their hiding places. But the toll of Zarqawi's (INAUDIBLE) is heavy. According to the State Department's recently released annual report on terror, Zarqawi's group is now the smallest, yet most lethal group and pose the most immediate threat. Responsible for horrific kidnappings, beheadings and suicide attacks. But U.S. officials hoped this increasing visibility and the competition to become the world's best known terrorist just might make them easier to catch. Andrea Mitchell, NBC News, Washington.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

OLBERMANN: Live public drownings. An Al Qaeda stunt? No, try May sweeps TV. Our own Monica Novotny gets what could be one of the last interviews with stunt man extraordinaire David Blaine, that's right, we hope he retires. And oh if we could only get Tom Cruise in that tank for a while. The "Mission Impossible" guy visits fun city and gets reactions that are even weirder than he is. That's next.

OLBERMANN: Life in the bubble. David Blaine literally in over his head in one filled with water, Tom Cruise leaving his figuratively bubble and finding bizarre fans. Britney Spears' bubble has burst forcing her to hire round the clock -- I don't care. That's next. This is COUNTDOWN.

OLBERMANN: If you stand far enough away the whole thing looks like one of those Christmas snow globes, you know like the one Orson Welles dropped in "Citizen Cain".

Only as our number two story in the COUNTDOWN proves tonight, it isn't a snow globe but some sort of diver Dan figure in the middle of it. It's the latest stunt of the most irritating escape artist of our time, David Blaine. He is in short the bore in the bubble. COUNTDOWN's senior aquatic stunt magic correspondent, Monica Novotny joins us now with an exclusive interview with him and I hope that he says more than gurgle, gurgle. Monica good evening?

MONICA NOVOTNY, MSNBC CORRESPONDENT: Do you know how long it took me to get that title finally?

OLBERMANN: Not that long actually.

NOVOTNY: Illusionist David Blaine dunked himself into a water filled orb in the middle of New York City this week, against his doctor's orders, because it's so much more exciting that way. And he's not coming out until next Monday. With just three days in there's already trouble in the bubble.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

NOVOTNY: How's the pruning? Fingers ok?

DAVID BLAINE, ILLUSIONIST: The fingers okay, both the hands are painful but you know it's not bad. It's not the worst that could happen.

NOVOTNY: Nothing can burst this guy's bubble. David Blaine, 33- year-old magician, illusionist, stunt guy, spending seven days under water in what looks like a custom built snow globe.

NOVOTNY: What were you thinking getting into this thing in the first place for a week?

BLAINE: I was excited.

NOVOTNY: Blaine's eight foot acrylic sphere filled with water kept it a cozy 97 degrees, his very own room with a view.

BLAINE: It's like a surreal world in here because I feel weightless and everything has these weird colors glowing around them. So it's kind of surreal but it's amazing.

NOVOTNY: It's not his first bizarre stunt. Blaine buried himself alive for seven days, froze himself in a block of ice for 61 hours, balanced on a 90 foot pillar for 35 hours. And almost three years ago in London, the New York native spent 44 days suspended above the Thames River in an acrylic box. Locals were not supportive, pelting the box with eggs.

What are people doing here? No eggs obviously.

BLAINE: No, the people here have been great. It makes it easier to get through the time.

NOVOTNY: Though fans admit they're stumped.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He has like a death wish or something.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Why is he in that bubble?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I don't think he's all there.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: He's out of his mind.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I want to know what his childhood was like.

NOVOTNY: After a week underwater, Blaine will be locked up in 150 pounds of chains then he'll have to hold his breath for at least nine minutes and try to untangle himself. Now he says if he doesn't do it, he could drown. Then he says we'd all see something that would be, "Pretty insane." I think we're already seeing it.

BLAINE: The reason I added the getting chained up part thrown in at the end was because I thought it was too easy.

NOVOTNY: You thought staying underwater for a week was too easy?

BLAINE: Yeah.

NOVOTNY: Skeptical? The magician swears there's no magic here. Inside he's allowed just oxygen, pants, gloves, boots, liquid meals and yes, a catheter. But like a fish out of water, his advisors say Blaine is not doing so well.

BLAINE: My doctors are telling me that this kind of could be the last one that I do like this because my body can't take much more of this.

NOVOTNY: So could this stunt really be Blaine's last? Don't hold your breath.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

NOVOTNY: Now Blaine says he started training back in December learning how to dive and practicing holding his breath for several minutes at a time. Now if he stays under for nine minutes at the end of this whole stunt without taking a breath as he tries to break out of those chains, he will break the underwater breath-holding world record which is currently held by German Tom Siestas at eight minutes 58 seconds.

OLBERMANN: And the Siestas memorial scholarship -- They had a medical report from his team about how that 2003 thing in London did for him? That came out.

NOVOTNY: Yes, it actually took two years but last November they sent a letter which was published in the New England Journal of Medicine. They said during that 44 day starvation period up in the box, he lost 1/4 of his body weight, more than 50 pounds; his blood chemistry afterwards was all off. No surprise there.

OLBERMANN: I think it was before hand. It didn't have before and after on it, right?

NOVOTNY: Right. And they said that his liver was damaged. So that's why they're telling him now that his body has just been under too much strain and that this has to be the last one.

OLBERMANN: Did you enjoy talking to a guy -- interviewing a guy inside of a big snow cone?

NOVOTNY: He said, you're cute at the end of the interview, but I think it was really just the orb distorting things.

OLBERMANN: Yeah, sure. COUNTDOWN's Monica Novotny, back from the orb. Great thanks.

From one stunt happy ego maniac to the next. Not talking about Monica. That's the segue into our roundup of celebrity entertainment news "Keeping Tabs." Tom Cruise plugging his movie again, speaking to fans but apparently only able to bring tears of joy from one fan, Cruise explained that's because the guy was Greek. He's been on a whirlwind promotional tour for "Mission Impossible Three." It's still three right, hasn't changed to four. Talking about that baby he just can't get enough of. He told David Letterman the birth happened quickly, offering no other details. But on "Live with Regis and Kelly" he said that he and Katie Holmes are absolutely fascinated with Suri even when she passes gas. Guess who she learned that trick from?

We'll now play the reception Cruise received from one member of the "Regis and Kelly" audience. [applause]

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

Thank you. [applause]

I tell you.

That man just broke down into tears over there.

He's a Greek guy.

Thank you.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

OLBERMANN: That wasn't about Regis. The long slow descent of "Sopranos" actors into real life criminality and general debauchery is now complete. Well, hardly. But James Gandolfini was in a traffic accident. The actor, who plays Tony famous in Manhattan for getting around town in anything but a car, was riding his Vespa scooter there when he was whacked by a cab. Well you know whacked is probably an unfortunate choice of words there. In any event, an employee of a nearby Dunkin Donuts said Gandolfini was more angry than hurt. I'll bet he was. Gandolfini's publicist says he was only scraped up a little and that the accident was so minor there was no need to exchange information. Mr. Gandolfini is fine now, home resting, the Vespa is in a repair shop and the cab driver is reportedly staying at a bed and breakfast in New Hampshire under an assumed name.

Any place we can hide from Britney Spears news? The press conference that wasn't. The baby sitter for hubby that might be. That's next. But first time for COUNTDOWN's latest list of nominees for worst person in the world. Tonight the bronze to passengers and the driver of a trolley in Milan in Italy. Some older women on board pointed out what they thought was an unattended bag and worst they said it seemed to be moving. As the driver prepared to alert the police another passenger said, no, that's my bag and of course it's moving, it's filled with four puppies.

Our runner up tonight, Mayor Frank Melton of Jackson, Mississippi is being investigated because last week driving along a busy interstate he spotted four buses carrying high school students and he motioned for the drivers to pull over so he could board the buses and shake hands with and hug the kids. It's been such a stressful two weeks he said. I wanted to shake their hands, I wanted to touch them, that's all it was. Great.

But our winner tonight Pat Patton, programming director of independent San Francisco TV station KRON. Slumped in ratings, losing money by the barrel. Mr. Patton came up with a solution, hire an astrologer. A numerologist who told him KRON's problem was its street address. So they changed it from 1001 Van Ness Avenue to one million one thousand five hundred and twenty two Van Ness Avenue. Change a TV operations fortune through an astrologer. That is the dopiest management decision -- hold on I've been in TV 25 years now. You know actually compared to most TV management, this guy seems relatively logical. Nevertheless. Pat Patton of KRON TV today's worst person in the world.

OLBERMANN: I've been a good boy lately. We reached 2/3 of Bill O's ratings last night. I've turned off all the lights in my office at the end of every day for weeks now. So how do my producers reward me? The COUNTDOWN college of production knowledge, in our number one slot tonight, they gave me a whole wheelbarrow full of stories they're forcing me to cover. Starting with the Britney Spears news conference that never happened. Either she cancelled it today or it was never scheduled in the first place. Spears' publicist telling "Access Hollywood" and then they told us, that it was just a rumor out of London. Either way the speculation had been that Spears would officially announce she is pregnant with her second child. There was no news conference. It's a girl, according to the tabloids and insiders saying Spears is preparing a second nursery in pink.

Spears has also hired a second babysitter, ah, but not for the little thumb sucker on the way, but rather for the one sharing her bed, her husband Kevin Federline. "In Touch

Weekly" insisting that Federline now has a bodyguard or sitter in tow to keep him from misbehaving and to report his behavior back to Spears. Federline said not to like it, Spears told him it was not negotiable. And he's obviously not sharp enough to lose the gum shoe. This after Spears' other bodyguard an ex-CIA agent named Richard reportedly quit because he was tired of Federline's partying. Another one of those many, many insiders, there's so much inside, that there's no outside left anymore, says that Spears lured Richard back to work with a promise quoting, "I'll take care of the Kevin situation, if you take care of me."

Let's call upon "Village Voice" columnist Michael Musto now. Good evening Michael. MICHAEL MUSTO, VILLAGE VOICE: Hi Keith.

OLBERMANN: That last quote, I don't even know what that means. I'll take care of the Kevin situation if you take care of me. What, any clue what that means?

MUSTO: It's quite obvious Keith. It means if you discard the umbilical cord, I'll make sure that Kevin doesn't retrieve it. Like last time I think it's beef jerky. What else could you think came out of that quote?

OLBERMANN: Another quote. The last thing Britney wants to do is accompany Kevin on all his club dates. Is this really about keeping him in line or is it about making sure she doesn't have to hear him rapping?

MUSTO: Yeah, it's about that infernal music. I mean who cares if he parties up a storm as long as he stops with that infernal music. These bodyguards are babysitters as it were to be assigned just to make sure he doesn't make another bad white rap music. Britney in her condition could not be privy to that. The baby will pop out, out of anxiety it'll hit its head like the last one. And what's more damaging its first memory of the world as we know it will be that infernal white rap music. This can't happen.

OLBERMANN: Maybe the head injury would cause that memory to disappear we could only hope. Supposedly the second child is due in October, which would be right after the first birthday of the first one, Sean Preston. And the tabloids are implying that La Spears wanted this boy girl combination and her family will be complete. So in the big picture, does this make Mr. Federline just a breeder here, will she be done with him shortly?

MUSTO: Absolutely. He did the old one two punch and he's out the door. He's history. I mean she'll leave a sample cup by the windowsill, but he's over. He's just gone. Though he's welcome to stay I'm sure as an intellectual sparring partner or to help Britney cornrow her hair. But basically Kevin, whoops, he did it again, he made a baby one more time and now good night and good luck, he's totally toxic.

OLBERMANN: One of these many reports here is quoting a Sony executive who said Britney has not held a press conference in so long that we know it's something big, pregnancy, a split, we're not sure. What was this news conference drama about? Did Spears get confused? Did she cancel it? Did my producer just hear the name Britney and start salivating like (INAUDIBLE) dogs?

MUSTO: I think so because Britney doesn't know from press conferences. She thinks that's something where you get together and iron your clothes. She thinks PR is someone you hire as a maid. She's dumb, she's so dumb. She thinks a publicist is someone who assists you to a pub. The woman has not had a press conference in years. The last one she had was to announce she read a book, Elle Girl. She's too busy hiring five babysitters, one for her, Kevin, the two kids, and one to guard that sample cup to make sure Jason Alexander doesn't get near it.

OLBERMANN: Thank goodness you pronounced publicist correctly at least. Conspiracy theory here, Spears cancelled this news conference because she did not want to field questions about the alleged babysitter for the husband.

MUSTO: You're reading a lot into this really. She's not an Oliver Stone movie she just didn't want to answer any questions. Though I will miss her immoral answer to all those questions, duh. Can you get a visual of this? Duh!

OLBERMANN: Yeah we have that. Let's shift over to Tom Cruise. The California legislature today banned the use of ultrasound machines for personal use, a bill they introduced after Tom Cruise had bought one of the machines when Katie Holmes was pregnant. I think we've all forgotten that, but it was true. The legislator who introduced the bill said he was worried about Tom Cruise copycats. Is this some sort of extra science fiction movie coming up here, "I Robot," starring Tom Cruise? Is this what we're coming to, Tom Cruise copycats?

MUSTO: There are not going to be any copycats on this. Tom is the only one who actually wanted to buy the sonogram. You know years ago I had a CAT scan, I didn't ask to buy it afterwards. I was hooked up to an IV drip, I didn't go home with it, well maybe I did. But Tom is a unique individual, he goes to a restaurant, comes home with a spatula, a waitress and some griddle cakes. He goes to a movie theater, comes home with a projector. There needs to be a law strictly about Tom Cruise. You cannot do this. You must stick to your own equipment. Well maybe not.

OLBERMANN: Well he went to a movie and came home with Katie Holmes.

MUSTO: Yeah exactly. Or maybe she was the waitress.

OLBERMANN: Regis, and what used to be Kathy Lee, Cruise is getting the guy to cry, is that the remainder of his fan base?

MUSTO: Well yeah, the Greek guy was crying like a baby, which is the closest Tom's been to a baby in a while. But, yeah, that is Tom's fan base now, basically he's (INAUDIBLE) with the geeks like that or people who want to sell sonograms. Greece loves him. I know Tom goes around the world, everyone's like boo, here. But in Greece, they're like we love you, we loved you in "Cocktail," we loved you in "Legend." Far and away --

OLBERMANN: Well maybe the guy was crying because he realized he was getting a picture with Tom Cruise. The one and only Michael Musto --

MUSTO: Or maybe he saw "Mission Impossible 3".

OLBERMANN: That's right. Always more interesting than the story he covers. Great thanks.

MUSTO: Thanks Keith.

OLBERMANN: That's COUNTDOWN for this the 1099th day since the declaration of mission accomplished in Iraq. I'm Keith Olbermann, good night and good luck.

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