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Know-It-All

Donald Rumsfeld may be even worse at writing a memoir than he was at being secretary of defense.

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Donald Rumsfeld's memoir has a great title: *Known and Unknown* is a play on his [famous remark](#) that there are "known knowns," "known unknowns," and "unknown unknowns." Apart from that, there's little to be said for this book, which stands to mark Rumsfeld as not only the most destructive secretary of defense in American history (a title already bestowed by many) but also the most mendacious political memoirist.

Some have [already noted](#) the tome's self-aggrandizement, its insistence that all the horrors and mishaps of George W. Bush's presidency were the faults of others—Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, George Tenet, Jerry Bremer, Richard Armitage, even (a little bit) George W. Bush. But never Donald Rumsfeld or his longtime friend Dick Cheney.

Many autobiographies exhibit this trait to some extent. It can even be tolerable if it's joined to an engaging style or sage insights about broader matters. Rumsfeld's book has no such redeeming features. And even if it did, its distortions and lies (I use the term advisedly) are just too blatant to be countenanced.

Most shameless are Rumsfeld's attempts to deny the undeniable fact that he ordered far fewer troops to Iraq than his army's generals recommended. "In reality," he writes, "there was full debate and discussion, but there was no disagreement among those of us responsible for the planning. ... Among [Gen. Richard] Myers, [Gen. Tommy] Franks and me, there was no conflict whatsoever regarding force levels. If anyone suggested to Franks or Myers that the war plan lacked sufficient troops, they never informed me" (p. 452).

This is playing word games. The key phrase is that there was no disagreement "among those of us *responsible* for the planning"—by which he apparently means *statutorily* "responsible." Myers was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Franks was the combatant commander; so they, along with Rumsfeld, were "responsible for the planning." It is extremely well-documented, however, that the senior officers who *created* the war plans engaged in endless disputes with Rumsfeld, who whittled down the troop levels again and again, over their objections. (For the proof, see [Cobra II](#) by Michael Gordon and Gen. Bernard Trainor, [Fiasco](#) by Thomas Ricks, [The Assassins' Gate](#) by George Packer, or [State of Denial](#) by Bob Woodward, among others.)

A secretary of defense has the right to overrule his commanders; civilian control of the military is a hallowed constitutional principle. And in one respect, Rumsfeld was right and the generals were wrong: It did not take as many troops as the generals said it would simply to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein's regime. However, the generals were right and Rumsfeld was very wrong on the much larger point of how many troops it would take to restore order and stability in the battle's aftermath.

Here Rumsfeld's error stemmed from sheer arrogance. Finding them excessive, he stripped away whole layers of support troops and logistics that the Army had built into the war plan. What he didn't comprehend was that these layers contained the vital elements for postwar "stability operations." The war plan, as Rumsfeld trimmed it down, ordered the columns of Army and Marine troops to dash straight toward Baghdad, bypassing the towns along the way, except to overwhelm the occasional pockets of resistance. This was a brilliant stroke, but no follow-on troops were allocated to occupy those bypassed areas—and thus to pre-empt the insurgency that grew up as a result.

"In retrospect," Rumsfeld allows, "it's possible there may have been times when more troops could have been helpful. ... It is conceivable that several thousand more troops in Baghdad, where most of the media were located, might have at least kept the capital from *appearing* so chaotic, a *perception* that proved damaging throughout our country and the world" (p. 664, italics added).

Amazing. Rumsfeld still doesn't get it. Insufficient troops didn't merely create a perception of chaos; it led to a real breakdown. At the time Rumsfeld scoffed at reports of looters making off with a few vases from the Baghdad museum ("[Stuff happens!](#)" he notoriously shrugged, one of the few statements that he regards as a "mistake" [p. 477]). But the bigger problem was that dozens of weapons depots were left unguarded and, so, Saddam-loyalists and the insurgents-to-come made off with thousands of small arms, ammunition, and explosives, with which they killed U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians in the coming months.

He doesn't even acknowledge this fact.

Rumsfeld's distortions of the issue don't stop there. At one point, he denies that he did limit the number of troops on the ground. "With nearly a half million ground troops available if necessary," he writes, "this was not the 'light footprint' war plan some critics would later claim it was" (p. 438). This is incredibly dishonest. The key phrase here is "available if necessary." Yes, there were some half-million ground troops, including those that weren't sent to Iraq. He could have ordered them into battle. But he didn't. He sent 140,000. (The Army's initial request was 400,000.) It definitely was a "light footprint." Rumsfeld boasted as much at the time, touting it as vindicating his theory of "[military transformation](#)."

It is true, as Rumsfeld claims, that the generals voiced no dissent over the question of troop levels at various meetings, inside the Pentagon and at the White House, where they could have spoken up. As many others have noted, the generals copped out; they abrogated their own constitutional duty. (One who didn't was [Lieut. Gen. Greg Newbold](#), the Joint Staff's operations director and, at the time, a likely pick to be the next commandant of the Marine Corps. Newbold resigned from the Marines, then spoke out in an op-ed piece published in *Time* magazine, criticizing the war, the war

plan, and Rumsfeld's callous treatment of military advice. Newbold is not mentioned in this memoir.)

Rumsfeld strikes a pose of puzzlement over what he calls the "myth" that he held officers in contempt and brooked no dissent. He writes: "I welcomed and made a point of encouraging different views, dissent and challenges" (p. 456). "I wanted candor" (p. 666). "I met with military leaders constantly and routinely deferred to those on the battlefield. ... Indeed, I thought that a more accurate criticism would have been that I too often deferred" (p. 705).

I know a dozen generals who will gasp, or laugh out loud, when they read those passages.

Rumsfeld's true attitude toward dissent came to light with his treatment of Gen. Eric Shinseki, the Army chief of staff. In February 2003, just before the war began, Shinseki was asked at a Senate hearing how many troops would be needed to maintain stability after Saddam Hussein was overthrown. After hemming and hawing a few times, he replied, "[several hundred thousand](#)." This was (though he didn't put it this way) twice as many troops as Rumsfeld was deploying.

The next day, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz brusquely attacked Shinseki's claim, calling it "way out of line." Shortly after, Rumsfeld announced the name of Shinseki's successor, even though the general's term wasn't up for nearly a year—thus ensuring his lame-duck status. Several officers told me at the time that the Shinseki treatment sent a clear signal to the entire officer corps: This is what happens if you run up against Don Rumsfeld.

Rumsfeld denies all of this, noting that Shinseki was allowed to serve out his term (an irrelevancy under the circumstances) and adding, "The Shinseki myth did harm to civil-military relations" (p. 456)—not allowing, for even a clause of a sentence, that his own behavior might deserve a smidgen of the blame.

The book devotes some space to the erroneous intelligence reports on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and alleged connections with al-Qaida. Rumsfeld puts all the blame on the CIA. Neither he nor any other Bush official lied, he says; they were simply wrong. However, he does concede that, during the early days of the occupation, when a reporter asked why the WMD hadn't been found, he replied, "[We know where they are, they're in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad](#)." He now claims he wasn't lying; he just misspoke. He should have made clear that he was referring to "suspect sites," not the WMD themselves (p. 435).

This explanation might have been slightly plausible—except that Rumsfeld doesn't even mention the Office of Special Plans, the unit that he set up inside the Pentagon that riffled through raw intel data and cherry-picked the bits that seemed to suggest an Iraqi connection with Osama Bin Laden. (The OSP did this after the CIA's analysts concluded that no such connection existed.) A February 2007 [report](#) by the U.S. Government Accountability Office concluded that this special unit, run by Assistant Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith (a member of Rumsfeld's inner circle), was improper for two reasons. First, the law forbids policymakers from doing intelligence analysis. Second, the unit "was producing intelligence products" without "clearly conveying to senior decision-makers" that their conclusions were at "variance with the consensus of the intelligence community."

Rumsfeld also waves away the "myth" that he or his aides were planning to put the exile Ahmad

Chalabi in charge of Iraq after the war. He writes, plainly: "[N]o one in the Department of Defense urged that Chalabi be 'anointed' as the ruler of post-Saddam Iraq" (p. 489). Maybe nobody used the word *anointed*. But it is a matter of record that Rumsfeld's deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, supplied the cargo-transport plane that flew Chalabi and 100 or so of his militiamen (who called themselves the "Free Iraqi Fighters") back to Iraq shortly after the invasion. Several former U.S. officials say that, before the war, Wolfowitz was actively lobbying the White House to back Chalabi's bid for power. (Bush opposed the idea of supporting anyone in particular.)

The book also finesses another key point that almost certainly, if indirectly, involved Chalabi—the orders, issued by L. Paul "Jerry" Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, to disband the Iraqi army and to block all members of Saddam's Baathist Party from holding government jobs in the new Iraq. These two orders doomed all prospects of postwar order and at least accelerated the coming insurgency. The disbanding of the Iraqi army turned tens of thousands of armed young men into the disgruntled unemployed. The banning of Baathists from public jobs did the same—and removed experienced bureaucrats (most of whom had been obligated to join the party) from the machinery of government.

Rumsfeld downplays the orders' significance, noting that Saddam's army deserted as the U.S. troops invaded and thus essentially "disbanded itself" (p. 517). At the same time, however, he acknowledges that, "in hindsight," the orders' "importance is unmistakable" (p. 515). He extricates himself from this contradiction by claiming that the orders were entirely Bremer's doing, though he also puts some blame on the NSC, which "should have deliberated the decision more fully" (pages 518-19).

This is maddening in three ways. First, as George Packer thoroughly demonstrates in *The Assassins' Gate*, U.S. officers in Iraq had been working with Iraqi officers to call up their troops. A plan was funded and in motion—until Bremer pulled the plug. Second, Bremer issued the orders in May 2003, just days after arriving in Baghdad. He could not have had time to write them himself. In his own memoir, Bremer claims that Doug Feith handed him the orders, saying they were to be his top priority, as Iraqis had to be shown that a new day was dawning.

It is still not known, after all these years, who wrote those two orders. (I suspect it came out of [Cheney's office](#), at the urging of Chalabi, who wanted to supplant the army with his own militia and who, as Rumsfeld acknowledges, turned de-Baathification into a splurge of "score-settling" [p. 515].) But it is unimaginable that Feith would have handed Bremer any orders without at least Rumsfeld's consent. Many of Rumsfeld's criticisms of Bremer's imperiousness and ignorance are on the money. But he doesn't mention, much less refute, the claim about getting his marching orders from Feith.

Finally, the NSC *did* take up the issue of what to do with the Iraqi army and the Baathists. On March 10, a week before the invasion, a principals meeting—attended by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Tenet, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and all of their top aides—decided that, after the war, a truth and reconciliation commission would be set up, similar to those in post-apartheid South Africa and post-Communist Eastern Europe, to ferret out the undesirable Baathists from those who could work for a new government. Staff analysts predicted that only about 5 percent of the party would have to be removed. On March 12, at another principals meeting, it was decided to disband the

Republican Guard—Saddam's elite corps and bodyguards—but to call the regular army's soldiers back to duty and to reconstitute their units after a proper vetting.

Both of these decisions were unanimous. In other words, Bremer's first two orders constituted acts of massive insubordination. Most of the NSC officials, including Bush, first read about the two orders in a newspaper.

Rumsfeld doesn't mention either of these meetings in his 815-page memoir.

Perhaps the most duplicitous passages in the book are those where Rumsfeld criticizes the NSC's decision-making process. "Often meetings were not well-organized" (p. 327). "Postwar planning for Iraq lacked effective interagency coordination, clear lines of responsibility, and the deadlines and accountability associated with a rigorous process" (p. 487). "I thought it would have been terrific if Rice and her [NSC] staff had the interest and skill to manage all U.S. efforts in Iraq and improve the situation. But they did not" (p. 525).

Certainly Rumsfeld is right that Rice was terrible at managing the NSC. (I once wrote a [column](#) calling her the worst national security adviser ever.) But what made her terrible was that she failed to rein in the machinations of Rumsfeld and Cheney.

Several officials have told me that, when the NSC was about to deal with an issue that Rumsfeld would rather avoid, he'd send to the meeting a deputy who would say that he wasn't authorized to make a decision. (Cheney would handle defeats by going to the Oval Office afterward and persuading Bush to reverse the NSC's decision.) On a number of occasions, the NSC would make a decision—sometimes with Bush present—and Rumsfeld would simply refuse to carry it out. This was particularly true of decisions involving the security and reconstruction of post-Saddam Iraq.

Twice, Rice went so far as to tell Bush that Rumsfeld wasn't doing what the NSC—what the president himself—had ordered him to do. Bush never intervened. He suggested that Rice call a meeting with Andy Card, the White House chief of staff, and have him settle the dispute. The NSC was famously dysfunctional, and Bush deserves most of the blame for declining to exert discipline. Rice was also at fault for failing to knock heads. But Rumsfeld was the joker who sowed the chaos to begin with. (It is significant that the NSC process became much more disciplined after Robert Gates became defense secretary in 2007.)

For this reason, the most jaw-dropping sentence in the entire book may be the one that appears in the middle of Page 326: "After a president has made a decision, a senior official has the responsibility to implement it faithfully." It was a responsibility that Rumsfeld routinely shirked, and one wonders if he wrote that sentence in mirth or delusion.

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