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AND HE SHALL BE JUDGED

Former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld has always answered his detractors by claiming that history will one day judge him kindly. But as he waits for that day, a new group of critics—his administration peers—are suddenly speaking out for the first time. What they're saying? It isn't pretty

By Robert Draper



ON THE MORNING OF Thursday, April 10, 2003, Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon prepared a top-secret briefing for George W. Bush. This document, known as the Worldwide Intelligence Update, was a daily digest of critical military intelligence so classified that it circulated among only a handful of Pentagon leaders and the president; Rumsfeld himself often delivered it, by hand, to the White House. The briefing's cover sheet generally featured triumphant, color images from the previous days' war efforts: On this particular morning, it showed the statue of Saddam Hussein being pulled down in Firdos Square, a grateful Iraqi child kissing an American soldier, and jubilant crowds thronging the streets of newly liberated Baghdad. And above these images, and just below the headline SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, was a quote that may have raised some eyebrows. It came from the Bible, from the book of Psalms: "Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him... To deliver their soul from death."

This mixing of Crusades-like messaging with war imagery, which until now has not been revealed, had become routine. On March 31, a U.S. tank roared through the desert beneath a quote from Ephesians: "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." On April 7, Saddam Hussein struck a dictatorial pose, under this passage from the First Epistle of Peter: "It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men." (*To see these and more Bush-administration intelligence cover sheets, visit [GQ.com's exclusive slideshow](#)*).

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These cover sheets were the brainchild of Major General Glen Shaffer, a director for intelligence serving both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense. In the days before the Iraq war, Shaffer's staff had created humorous covers in an attempt to alleviate the stress of preparing for battle. Then, as the body counting began, Shaffer, a Christian, deemed the biblical passages more suitable. Several others in the Pentagon disagreed. At least one Muslim analyst in the building had been greatly offended; others privately worried that if these covers were leaked during a war conducted in an Islamic nation, the fallout—as one Pentagon staffer would later say—“would be as bad as Abu Ghraib.”

But the Pentagon's top officials were apparently unconcerned about the effect such a disclosure might have on the conduct of the war or on Bush's public standing. When colleagues complained to Shaffer that including a religious message with an intelligence briefing seemed inappropriate, Shaffer politely informed them that the practice would continue, because “my seniors”—JCS chairman Richard Myers, Rumsfeld, and the commander in chief himself—appreciated the cover pages.

But one government official was disturbed enough by these biblically seasoned sheets to hold on to copies, which I obtained recently while debriefing the past eight years with those who lived them inside the West Wing and the Pentagon. Over the past several months, the battle to define the Bush years has begun taking shape: As President Obama has rolled back his predecessor's foreign and economic policies, Dick Cheney, Ari Fleischer, and former speechwriters Michael Gerson and Marc Thiessen have all taken to the airwaves or op-ed pages to cast the Bush years in a softer light. My conversations with more than a dozen Bush loyalists, including several former cabinet-level officials and senior military commanders, have revealed another element of this legacy-building moment: intense feelings of ill will toward Donald Rumsfeld. Though few of these individuals would speak for the record (knowing that their former boss, George W. Bush, would not approve of it), they believe that Rumsfeld's actions epitomized the very traits—arrogance, stubbornness, obliviousness, ineptitude—that critics say drove the Bush presidency off the rails.

Many of these complaints are long-standing. Over the past three years, several of Bush's former advisers have described their boss's worst mistake as keeping Rumsfeld around as long as he did. “Don did not like to play well with other people,” one cabinet official told me—stating a grievance that nearly everyone in the White House seemed to share, except for Bush himself. “There was exasperation,” recalls a senior aide. ““How much more are we going to have to endure? Why are we keeping this guy?”” Rumsfeld has also received ongoing criticism that his Bush-mandated efforts to modernize America's Cold War-era military contributed to the early stumbles in Iraq. But in speaking with the former Bush officials, it becomes evident that Rumsfeld impaired administration performance on a host of matters extending well beyond Iraq to impact America's relations with other nations, the safety of our troops, and the response to Hurricane Katrina.

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The Scripture-adorned cover sheets illustrate one specific complaint I heard again and again: that Rumsfeld's tactics—such as playing a religious angle with the president—often ran counter to sound decision-making and could, occasionally, compromise the administration's best interests. In the case of the sheets, publicly flaunting his own religious views was not at all the SecDef's style—"Rumsfeld was old-fashioned that way," Shaffer acknowledged when I contacted him about the briefings—but it was decidedly Bush's style, and Rumsfeld likely saw the Scriptures as a way of making a personal connection with a president who frequently quoted the Bible. No matter that, if leaked, the images would reinforce impressions that the administration was embarking on a religious war and could escalate tensions with the Muslim world. The sheets were not Rumsfeld's direct invention—and he could thus distance himself from them, should that prove necessary.

Still, the sheer cunning of pairing unsentimental intelligence with religious righteousness bore the signature of one man: Donald Rumsfeld. And as historians slog through the smoke and mirrors of his tenure, they may find that Rumsfeld's most enduring legacy will be the damage he did to Bush's.

"WHAT RUMSFELD WAS most effective in doing," says a former senior White House official, "was not so much undermining a decision that had yet to be made as finding every way possible to delay the implementation of a decision that *had* been made and that he didn't like." At meetings, he'd throw up every obstacle he could. "Rumsfeld would say, 'Golly, we haven't had time to read all of these documents! I mean, this is radical *change!*'" the official adds. "And then, if you suggested that maybe he should've read all the documents when everyone first got them a week ago, he'd say: 'Well! I've been all over the *world* since then! What have *you* been doing?'"

The Department of Justice got a taste of such stalling tactics two months after September 11, when the president issued an order authorizing the establishment of military commissions to try suspected terrorists. Rumsfeld resisted this imposition of authority on his DoD turf. "We tried to get these military commissions up and running," recalls one former DoJ official. "There'd be a lot of 'Well, he's working on it.' In my own view, that's cost the administration a lot. Hearings for detainees would've been viewed one way back in 2002. But by 2006"—the year commissions were at last enacted—"it's not so appealing."

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Similarly, Rumsfeld delayed the implementation of a 2004 presidential order granting our Australian and British allies access to the Pentagon's classified Internet system known as SIPRNet. "He always had what sounded like a good reason," says one of Bush's top advisers. "But I had a lot of back channels and found out that it was being held up." It finally took Australian prime minister John Howard forcibly complaining to Bush about the matter in the fall of 2006 for SIPRNet to become accessible.

"In many ways," says one of Bush's national-security advisers, "Rumsfeld was more interested in being perceived to be in charge than actually being in charge." When I repeated this quote to an administration official privy to Rumsfeld's war efforts, this person's eyes lit up. "One of the most fateful, knock-down-drag-outs was over postwar reconstruction," says this official. "It was the question of who'd take charge, State or DoD. Rumsfeld made a presentation about chain of command. 'If State takes over here, are you saying Tommy Franks is going to report to a State official? Mr. President, that's not in the Constitution!'"

"I'm not saying State could have done any better," this official says of the bungled reconstruction efforts. "But he *owned* it."

That is, until he disowned it. In May 2003, six weeks after the fall of Baghdad, Bush decreed that newly appointed envoy to Iraq Paul Bremer would be reporting directly to the secretary of defense. But within seven months, according to Bremer's book *My Year in Iraq*, Rumsfeld had completely washed his hands of the faltering reconstruction efforts.

At times, this my-way-or-no-way approach could even come at the expense of his soldiers. Shortly before the Iraq invasion, King Abdullah II of Jordan decreed that warplanes could not overfly his country if they had previously flown over Israel. The king's demand meant that U.S. fighters would need to make a multiple-hour detour before proceeding to their targets. Rumsfeld had himself been a fighter pilot and presumably recognized the absurdity of the detour, and so one NSC aide approached him during a meeting in the Situation Room as the matter was being discussed.

"Excuse me, Mr. Secretary," said the aide. "I want you to know that Dr. Rice is prepared to call the king to get that restriction removed so that our kids don't have to fly the extra two and a half or three hours."

Rumsfeld looked up from his coffee. "When I need your help," he said, "I'll ask."

The secretary did not ask for the help, and so his soldiers went the extra distance, unnecessarily. This seemingly instinctive stubbornness adds to the growing consensus that Rumsfeld's obduracy—on increasing troop levels, on recognizing the insurgency—was a primary cause of mishap in Iraq. But Rumsfeld and his defenders have already begun to counter this story line, most notably with an op-ed by Rumsfeld himself in *The New York Times* published last November—in which he argued, remarkably, that he had been "incorrectly portrayed as an opponent of the surge in Iraq." ("I was amused by that," says one top White House official, sounding unamused. "The Casey war plan was very much his." A former senior commander qualifies this view by pointing out that General George Casey did in fact increase troop levels in 2004 and 2006—but then adds, "Whenever we asked for increases, there was a certain amount of tension with Rumsfeld: Why couldn't we do with less?")

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The assignment of blame for what went wrong in Iraq will continue to be a matter of vigorous debate. But what's been less discussed is Rumsfeld's effect on the relationship between Bush and Vladimir Putin. Bush began his presidency determined to forge a new, post-Cold War relationship with Putin, and a year after their June 2001 "sense of his soul" meeting, the two leaders released a statement pledging dialogue on matters ranging from bilateral investment to missile-defense systems. But Rumsfeld, who had also served as Gerald Ford's secretary of defense during the Cold War, wasn't on board. According to an administration official closely involved in U.S.-Russia policy, "From the get-go, it was clear that the Pentagon had no interest in anything that was in that document. Rumsfeld wanted to do the minimum and move on."

Rumsfeld's office cut against Bush's pledge of cooperation and transparency with Russia on "a whole host of things," says this official: the proposed Russian-American Observation Satellite, the Joint Data Exchange Center, plutonium disposition. By 2005 the Bush-Putin partnership had soured for a variety of reasons, including Russia's growing economic swagger and America's Iraq-induced decline in global prestige. But, the official observes, Rumsfeld "did not help the relationship; that's clear." Russia came to believe that the U.S. wasn't interested in cooperating, and Rumsfeld's actions "devalued what the president had originally said. It made the Russians believe he lacked credibility."

"No one," says another former official, "threw sand in the gears like Rumsfeld."

ONE OF RUMSFELD'S other favorite tactics was obfuscation. "He was always bringing questions," recalls a senior White House adviser of Rumsfeld. "Never answers." The SecDef most famously revealed this obsession with mystery in a February 2002 news conference while speculating on Iraq's links to terrorist groups. There were, he explained, "known knowns" and then "known unknowns—that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know." But, he added, there were also "unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know." The paradox of Rumsfeld's tenure is that in seeking to know all he could know, he also sought to control all he could control—and control inevitably came at the expense of accurate knowledge.

"Rumsfeld believed that all of the power from the military needed to migrate up to his level," recalls one former senior commander who got along well with the SecDef. "But you can't run an organization like the Department of Defense with everything going through the eye of the needle. It just doesn't work. And it wasn't just his inability to build a team *below* him. It was also his inability to play as a team player *above* him."

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This unwillingness to cooperate was not a trifling matter. When the Department of Homeland Security was formed in 2002, Rumsfeld smelled a turf war. "He was very uncooperative in a petty way, and he would send some lower-level person to the secretarial meetings," recalls one former top West Wing adviser. At least he sent *somebody*. When Condoleezza Rice appointed Robert Blackwill to the Iraq Stabilization Group in 2003 to oversee that country's rickety reconstruction efforts, Rumsfeld saw the new group as an encroachment and therefore elected to dispatch no DoD personnel to its meetings. Here was the Rumsfeld paradox in action—his need for control trumping his desire for information—and his own subordinates could see the cost. "The truth is," recalls a former aide, "having people in the National Security Council is how you *influence* the NSC. So he would weaken himself by not having his eyes and ears there."

Another such trespasser on Rumsfeld's turf was the deputy national-security adviser for combating terrorism—an office that Rumsfeld once decreed does not exist. Its third occupant was a woman, Fran Townsend, and Rumsfeld's contempt for her was well-known throughout the building. "You think I'm going to talk to this broad?" he would complain.

After repeatedly being snubbed, Townsend approached Rumsfeld at a principals' meeting, the NSC gatherings of senior officials. "Mr. Secretary, if I've in some way offended you, I apologize," she said. "I'm just trying to do my job."

Whereupon Rumsfeld laughed loudly, put his arm around her shoulder, and boomed, "Ab-so-lute-ly *not!* Why, nothing could be further from the truth!"

Two years later, however, Townsend had received a promotion—to assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism—yet was still unable to command Rumsfeld's respect. In the midst of Hurricane Rita, Townsend learned that Texas governor Rick Perry had signaled his willingness to cede control of the National Guard to the federal government. She called Rumsfeld's aide and was told, "The secretary and Mrs. Rumsfeld are at an event."

Townsend knew that. The event was an ambassadors' ball; she was supposed to be there but was instead dealing with the crisis. "Put me in to his detail," she ordered.

A minute later, Townsend was on the phone with Rumsfeld's security agent, who then spoke to the SecDef. "The secretary will talk to you after the event," she was told.

Later in the evening, her phone rang. It was Chief of Staff Andy Card. "Rumsfeld just called," said Card. "What is it you need?"

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Livid, Townsend said, "I want to know if the president knows what a fucking asshole Don Rumsfeld is."

Sighing, the chief of staff replied, "It isn't you, Fran. He treats Condi the same way. Me, too. He's always telling me I'm the worst chief of staff ever."

As objects of Rumsfeld's scorn, Card and Townsend took a backseat to Senator Ted Kennedy. During the final months of the Bush presidency, a White House program had been quietly under way to award numerous Presidential Medals of Freedom. Nomination forms were distributed, and several in the White House—apparently including Condi Rice and Chief of Staff Josh Bolten—suggested Kennedy, without whose support Bush's single most important domestic-policy achievement, the No Child Left Behind education initiative, would never have been realized. Administration sources say Bush was warm to the idea of awarding a medal to the cancer-stricken senator. Doing so would have come across as a bighearted, postpartisan gesture in the unpopular president's final days. But ultimately he chose not to, siding with the more conservative members of the White House who had been receiving encouragement from the vice president's longtime friend Donald Rumsfeld. The former SecDef had even made a point of bringing up the subject at a Beltway social gathering late last year.

"They can't give Kennedy a medal!" he'd declared. "Not after he murdered that woman!"—referring to the Mary Jo Kopechne incident on Chappaquiddick Island nearly forty years earlier.

A FINAL STORY OF Rumsfeld's intransigence begins on Wednesday, August 31, 2005. Two days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans—and the same day that Bush viewed the damage on a flyover from his Crawford, Texas, retreat back to Washington—a White House advance team toured the devastation in an Air Force helicopter. Noticing that their chopper was outfitted with a search-and-rescue lift, one of the advance men said to the pilot, "We're not taking you away from grabbing people off of rooftops, are we?"

"No, sir," said the pilot. He explained that he was from Florida's Hurlburt Field Air Force base—roughly 200 miles from New Orleans—which contained an entire fleet of search-and-rescue helicopters. "I'm just here because you're here," the pilot added. "My whole unit's sitting back at Hurlburt, wondering why we're not being used."

The search-and-rescue helicopters were not being used because Donald Rumsfeld had not yet approved their deployment—even though, as Lieutenant General Russ Honoré, the cigar-chomping commander of Joint Task Force Katrina, would later tell me, "that Wednesday, we needed to evacuate people. The few helicopters we had in there were busy, and we were trying to deploy more."

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And three years later, when I asked a top White House official how he would characterize Rumsfeld's assistance in the response to Hurricane Katrina, I found out why. "It was commonly known in the West Wing that there was a battle with Rumsfeld regarding this," said the official. "I can't imagine another defense secretary throwing up the kinds of obstacles he did."

Though various military bases had been mobilized into a state of alert well before the advance team's tour, Rumsfeld's aversion to using active-duty troops was evident: "There's no doubt in my mind," says one of Bush's close advisers today, "that Rumsfeld didn't like the concept."

The next day, three days after landfall, word of disorder in New Orleans had reached a fever pitch. According to sources familiar with the conversation, DHS secretary Michael Chertoff called Rumsfeld that morning and said, "You're going to need several thousand troops."

"Well, I disagree," said the SecDef. "And I'm going to tell the president we don't need any more than the National Guard."

The problem was that the Guard deployment (which would eventually reach 15,000 troops) had not arrived—at least not in sufficient numbers, and not where it needed to be. And though much of the chaos was being overstated by the media, the very suggestion of a state of anarchy was enough to dissuade other relief workers from entering the city. Having only recently come to grips with the roiling disaster, Bush convened a meeting in the Situation Room on Friday morning. According to several who were present, the president was agitated. Turning to the man seated at his immediate left, Bush barked, "Rumsfeld, what the hell is going on there? Are you watching what's on television? Is that the United States of America or some Third World nation I'm watching? What the hell are you *doing*?"

Rumsfeld replied by trotting out the ongoing National Guard deployments and suggesting that sending active-duty troops would create "unity of command" issues. Visibly impatient, Bush turned away from Rumsfeld and began to direct his inquiries at Lieutenant General Honoré on the video screen. "From then on, it was a Bush-Honoré dialogue," remembers another participant. "The president cut Rumsfeld to pieces. I just wish it had happened earlier in the week."

But still the troops hadn't arrived. And by Saturday morning, says Honoré, "we had dispersed all of these people across Louisiana. So we needed more troops to go to distribution centers, feed people, and maintain traffic." That morning Bush convened yet another meeting in the Situation Room. Chertoff was emphatic. "Mr. President," he said, "if we're not going to begin to get these troops, we're not going to be able to get the job done."

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Rumsfeld could see the writing on the wall and had come prepared with a deployment plan in hand. Still, he did not volunteer it. Only when Bush ordered, "Don, do it," did he acquiesce and send in the troops—a full five days after landfall.

Today, when I presented this account to Rumsfeld's then homeland-affairs assistant, Paul McHale, he denied that Rumsfeld's actions resulted in any delay: "This was by far the largest, fastest deployment of forces probably for any purposes in the history of the United States." McHale argues that Rumsfeld's caution was due to his conviction that Bush could not send in the military as de facto law-enforcement officers under the Insurrection Act. But as one of the top lawyers involved in such scenarios for Katrina would say, "That in my mind was just a stall tactic so as not to get the active-duty military engaged. All you needed to do was use them for logistics."

Ultimately, Rumsfeld's obfuscations about National Guard rotations, unity-of-command challenges, and the Insurrection Act did not serve his commander in chief, says one senior official intimately involved with the whole saga: "There's a difference between saying to the president of the United States, 'I understand, and let me solve it,' and making the president figure out the right question to ask."

"What it's about," says this official, "is recognizing that in an emergency, the appearance of control has real operational significance. If people are panicked, everything becomes harder. If we had put those troops in on Thursday, the narrative of Katrina would be a very different one."

AT ANY BURIAL, some praise is appropriate. Donald Rumsfeld demanded much of others, but also of himself. Even the commanders who loathed him appreciated how he stood up for them in wartime, especially during the pitfalls at Fallujah and Abu Ghraib. He did not whine. He did not capriciously fire—and, if anything, was too slow to fire those he found wanting. Quietly yet frequently, he visited the hospital beds of those he had sent into battle. And though his former colleagues have been quick to point out his miscues, one man—the man who dubbed himself "the Decider" when describing his refusal to let Rumsfeld go—clearly saw something in him.

What, then, was it that caused Bush to keep Rumsfeld around for so long?

The relationship between the two men was formal, reflecting generational differences. The president never called Rumsfeld "Rummy" to his face, says a close adviser: "He'd always do a dramatic '*Mr. Donald Rumsfeld! Mr. Secretary!*' You have to understand, in any cabinet but no doubt in ours, Condi, Powell, and Rumsfeld were larger-than-life personalities who dwarfed any other cabinet member. And Rumsfeld used that to great effect."

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Bush also enjoyed Rumsfeld's cussedness, his alpha-dog behavior toward the media. That same behavior toward his colleagues did not seem to bother the president. To Bush, rivalry was healthy, and the full extent of Rumsfeld's conduct was not known to him for the simple reason, say aides, that they did not wish to trouble the leader of the Free World every time Rumsfeld jerked them around.

But when the Abu Ghraib scandal broke in the spring of 2004, Bush was upset that the Pentagon had not shared the damning photos with him before *60 Minutes II* aired them. He called Rumsfeld on the Oval Office carpet, an incident that the White House leaked to *The Washington Post* to convey the president's dissatisfaction to the public. Rumsfeld read the story the next morning, May 6, and promptly drafted a letter of resignation. Bush received the letter with bemusement. Ol' Rummy had called his bluff. The president took no further action.

Nonetheless, as conditions in Iraq worsened throughout 2005 and early 2006, removing Rumsfeld was a "rolling - conversation" with Bush and top aides. One adviser recalls bringing up the matter twice. Each time, says this adviser, Bush shrugged and said, "Who've we got to replace him?" The adviser wondered why the president never initiated a search process.

By the spring of 2006, Bush at last seemed receptive to relieving Rumsfeld. But in April, when a half-dozen retired generals voiced their beliefs that the SecDef should be fired, Bush dug in his heels. That same month, Bush invited several of his top advisers to a meeting at the White House, where a show of hands went in favor of removing Rumsfeld before the '06 midterm elections. "There were plenty of substantive reasons given for why he should be fired," recalls a participant, "and not one substantive reason for why he should stay. People said that it would look bad to fire him after the retired generals said he should be fired, but no one offered any defense of Rumsfeld at all."

Rumsfeld kept his job for six more months while midterm-threatened Republicans clamored for his head. Politicizing the issue by replacing Rumsfeld during the electoral cycle was precisely what the president refused to do, say aides. These same aides were deluged with calls from angry Republicans when Bush announced the day after the election that Bob Gates would be replacing Rumsfeld. "A lot of people on the Hill were pissed," admits one such adviser.

"I think most Republicans believe that if Rumsfeld had been dismissed before the election, we would've hung on to the Senate," says South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham. "I think they're probably right."

"I KNOW HIM enough to know that he was both surprised and hugely disappointed," says one military commander who saw the SecDef shortly after Bush's November 8 announcement of his departure. But at his hour-long farewell ceremony at the Pentagon on December 15, Rumsfeld maintained his unflappable affect. Though the event was freighted with solemnity, replete with salutes and detonating cannons, he joked merrily with both the vice president and Bush—"almost to an inappropriate degree for the setting," says one colleague, who later asked Rumsfeld about his ebullience.

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Referring to Bush and Cheney, Rumsfeld said, "I wanted them to have fun."

But at the end of the ceremony, the president could be seen climbing into his sedan, wearing an expression that one could interpret any number of ways: guilt, disappointment, self-loathing, a general sadness. Not "fun," however.

From beginning to end, the Rumsfeld experience was never that.

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