

US crisis in Iraq sparks Republican attacks on Rumsfeld

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With only weeks to go before the inauguration of the Bush administration's second term, a raging dispute has broken out within the Republican Party over the performance of US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Leading Republicans have denounced the Pentagon's civilian chief in terms that are at least as harsh as those previously used by their ostensible political opponents in the Democratic Party.

This gang of right-wing millionaire politicians has suddenly discovered the plight of the "grunts" in Iraq, posturing as their advocates while flaying the defense secretary for his arrogance and insensitivity to the needs of the US soldiers.

"I have no confidence in Rumsfeld's leadership," declared Nebraska Republican Senator Chuck Hagel in a televised interview. "I think those in the Pentagon, specifically the civilian leadership, failed this country in addressing a post-Saddam Iraq." It was "astounding," he added, that no one was held accountable.

Former Senate majority leader Trent Lott described himself as "no fan" of Rumsfeld, adding that he wanted to see him replaced as defense secretary "in the next year or so."

Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican and former Vietnam prisoner of war, also declared he had "no confidence" in Rumsfeld, adding that he had "very strong differences of opinion" with the defense secretary, particularly over troop levels in Iraq.

Voicing an explicit call for Rumsfeld's resignation is William Kristol, the editor of the *Weekly Standard*, an influential publication within the Republican right. Kristol was among those demanding an invasion of Iraq in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, exploiting the terrorist attacks to promote a war that he had advocated for several years.

Like other pundits of his ilk, Kristol claimed that the US takeover of Iraq would be a cakewalk. In recent months, however, he has grown increasingly hysterical about the debacle facing the US in Iraq. He has criticized the administration for not increasing troop levels and demanded the unleashing of unrestrained military power to crush popular resistance.

"Contrast the magnificent performance of our soldiers with the arrogant buck-passing of Rumsfeld," Kristol wrote in a

recent column. The piece concludes, "These troops deserve a better defense secretary than the one we have."

Kristol and the Republican politicians have focused on Rumsfeld's December 8 appearance before nearly 2,000 US troops preparing to deploy from Kuwait to Iraq. In response to defiant questions from soldiers about the lack of armored vehicles and other equipment, the defense secretary answered dismissively that "you can have all the armor in the world" and you still "can be blown up."

These criticisms have also fed the firestorm around revelations that Rumsfeld had relegated the signing of condolence letters to dead soldiers' next of kin to a machine. The practice, which epitomizes the administration's indifference to the deaths of more than 1,300 US troops in Iraq, was first exposed in a column published a month ago by David Hackworth, a retired US Army colonel.

After repeatedly denying that there was any truth to Hackworth's charge, the Pentagon was forced to reveal that, indeed, the letters had been signed by a machine, while Rumsfeld issued a statement pledging that he would personally sign them in the future. The corporate media picked up the story, interviewing family members who were justifiably outraged at the contempt shown by the Pentagon.

In his end-of-the-year press conference, Bush found himself compelled to defend his defense secretary. "I know Secretary Rumsfeld's heart," he declared unconvincingly. The Pentagon chief, he insisted, is "a good human being" who is "doing a really fine job."

Rumsfeld himself penned an opinion piece for *USA Today* on Tuesday, praising "the men and women in uniform [who] are putting their lives on the line."

He continued: "In recent days, much has been made of a question I received from a National Guard soldier at a town hall meeting in Kuwait about armor on Army vehicles. His question was a fair one, and I share his impatience."

Behind the phony claims of concern about the lives and welfare of the enlisted men and women deployed in Iraq—by Rumsfeld and his detractors—there exist deep divisions and uncertainty within the administration and the US ruling elite as a whole.

This is not the first time that the defense secretary has served

as a designated political lightning rod over the crisis confronting Washington's colonial enterprise in Iraq. Just last May, there were widespread demands for Rumsfeld's resignation in response to the international outrage over the photographs showing US military personnel torturing Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison.

There were indications then—as now—that the White House gave the green light for the attacks on Rumsfeld as a means of deflecting criticism away from Bush himself. In the midst of the Abu Ghraib scandal, it was leaked to the press that Bush had rebuked Rumsfeld for failing to inform him about the existence of the photographs.

The fact that Iraqis were subjected to torture was itself never the focus of the controversy in Washington. Rather, it was a matter of the president's image and the damage done to US foreign policy by the publication of photographs exposing the ugly reality of the US war in Iraq.

Since then, it is worth noting, new photographs have surfaced showing Special Operations troops abusing prisoners, while multiple reports and documents have exposed the continuation of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, as well as the systematic killing of civilians by US military units. None of this has evoked a peep of outrage against Rumsfeld, either on Capitol Hill or within the media. Rather, both have applauded as US forces have carried out savage attacks on civilian targets in Fallujah and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Alberto Gonzales, the White House counsel who was instrumental in drafting the legal briefs justifying torture and the abrogation of the Geneva Conventions, has been nominated as US attorney general.

In the present controversy, it was initially reported that Kristol had boasted that the White House had urged him to write his column calling for Rumsfeld's replacement. The right-wing columnist subsequently denied this account. Whatever the truth of the matter, the fact that such a connection was widely suspected is evidence of the intense pressures building up within the administration.

These tensions have multiple objective sources. First, behind the empty assertions that the Iraqi elections planned for January 30 will mark a turning point in the US occupation, it is obvious to both the American military and the US State Department that this exercise will only provoke greater upheavals, while doing nothing to stem the mounting attacks on US forces.

Second, there are indications that elements within the White House and the Pentagon are contemplating new acts of aggression against Syria, Iran or both in retaliation for their perceived interference with US attempts to erect a puppet regime in Iraq. Any new military adventure, given the present crisis confronting the Pentagon in Iraq, has the potential of stretching the American armed forces to the breaking point.

Then there are the long-standing tensions between Rumsfeld and the uniformed command over Iraq and the defense secretary's sweeping proposals for transforming the military.

These two issues came together in the conflict over troop levels in Iraq, beginning with the invasion in March 2003. The top brass have bitterly resented Rumsfeld's micro-managing of deployments and have excoriated the defense secretary behind his back for failing to anticipate the intense counterinsurgency campaign now confronting the US military.

Divisions at the top between the uniformed and civilian leaderships of the armed forces have been joined by an increasingly restive mood among the US enlisted personnel, reflected in the defiant attitude of the soldiers who questioned Rumsfeld in Kuwait earlier this month.

There is growing concern over the multiple rotations of US units into Iraq, the continuous lengthening of tours of duty for units already there and the use of such measures as "stop-loss" to prevent soldiers from exercising their right to leave the military. It is feared that such practices are not only destroying morale and crippling recruitment efforts, but also creating conditions for acts of mutiny within the occupation forces.

These are the issues underlying the sudden discovery that Donald Rumsfeld is "arrogant" and "insensitive." The internecine dispute within the Republican Party has nothing to do with any genuine concern for the lives and welfare of the young US soldiers in Iraq—drawn overwhelmingly from the working class and the most impoverished layers of society. As far as the ruling elite is concerned, their lives are expendable in the pursuit of the strategic interests of American capitalism.

Whether Rumsfeld will hold onto his post at the Pentagon after January is now a matter of intense speculation.

The entire dispute is playing out as the US presence in Iraq is becoming increasingly unpopular with the American public. Bush's reelection, far from providing some sort of mandate, has done nothing to dampen the mass opposition to the war. The latest poll released by ABC News and the *Washington Post* shows 56 percent of those questioned describing the war as not worth fighting, a marked increase over a poll conducted last July. While more than half of those polled said Rumsfeld should be replaced, an even greater number—57 percent—said they disapproved of Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq.

Under these conditions, for Bush to remove Rumsfeld in response to public criticism holds obvious dangers. The defense secretary has been so instrumental in the development of the administration's policy of unprovoked military aggression that employing him as a scapegoat threatens to drag the White House itself down with him.



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