

The generals' revolt and the decay of US democracy

Bill Van Auken
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The demand by more than a half-dozen former senior military commanders that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld resign has laid bare deep divisions within the state apparatus and the profound decay of America's bourgeois democratic order.

President George W. Bush lashed out at Rumsfeld's critics Tuesday in shouted remarks in the White House Rose Garden that combined belligerence and hysteria. Declaring that he did not "appreciate the speculation" about the defense secretary's future, Bush declared, "I hear the voices, and I read the front page, and I know the speculation. But I'm the decider, and I decide what is best, and what's best is for Don Rumsfeld to remain as the secretary of defense."

It was the second time in barely five days that Bush felt compelled to make a public statement reiterating his support for Rumsfeld. Last Friday, he interrupted his Easter vacation to declare that "Secretary Rumsfeld's energetic and steady leadership is exactly what is needed at this critical period."

Clearly, the administration has been rattled by its military critics. These include prominent, recently retired commanders of US troops in Iraq—Army Maj. Gen. Paul Eaton, who was in charge of training the Iraqi army, Maj. Gen. John Batiste, who commanded the Army's 1st Infantry Division in Iraq, Maj. Gen. Charles Swannack, the former commander of the 82nd Airborne—who have labeled the intervention there a "strategic failure" and a "disaster."

According to published reports, as many as two dozen other senior retired officers are considering joining in the demand for Rumsfeld's ouster. It is widely acknowledged that this public campaign is being coordinated behind the scenes with senior commanders still on active duty in the armed forces.

Rumsfeld himself attempted to brush off this campaign, linking it to his aggressive pursuit of "military transformation," including the downsizing of the US Army, suggesting that his "modernizing" efforts had antagonized elements of a hide-bound uniformed brass.

"People like things the way they are, and so when you make a change... somebody's not going to like it," he told a Pentagon press conference Tuesday after raking over old controversies, from a 30-year-old debate over what cannon to put on the Army's main battle tank to the cancelled contract for the Crusader battlefield howitzer.

Such arguments are hardly convincing and do nothing to counter the impact of the military commanders' criticisms on public opinion, under conditions in which broad masses of the American people have already concluded that the war was wrong and US troops should be withdrawn. In the latest *USA Today*/Gallup poll issued Monday, 57 percent said that the invasion of Iraq was a mistake—the highest rate since polling began on this question—while 65 percent said they

disapproved of Bush's handling of Iraq.

With the situation in Iraq spiraling towards catastrophe—a sectarian civil war is intensifying and at least 50 US troops have been killed there so far this month alone—Bush's praise for Rumsfeld's leadership is highly provocative, and his refusal to acknowledge the pressure building up within the military raises the troubling question of how far the present confrontation will go.

Clearly, the Bush White House fears that to remove Rumsfeld would only strengthen popular opposition to the war and further undermine the administration. Rumsfeld, together with Vice President Dick Cheney—both veterans of the Vietnam War-era Nixon administration—are the key architects of the war. For either to be forced out could lead to the unraveling of the administration as a whole.

In a government that is guilty of war crimes, the operative principle is summed up in words spoken by Benjamin Franklin under radically different circumstances: "We must all hang together, or we will assuredly hang separately."

In the midst of the firestorm within the Pentagon, an internal Army memo obtained by the online magazine *Salon* quotes a senior military investigator as saying that Rumsfeld was "personally involved in the interrogation" of Mohammed al-Kahtani, a Saudi detainee at Guantánamo, closely overseeing "abusive and degrading" treatment tantamount to torture. "The question at this point is not whether Secretary Rumsfeld should resign. It's whether he should be indicted," said a spokesperson for Human Rights Watch in response to the revelation.

To quash military demands for Rumsfeld's ouster, the Pentagon leadership has attempted to rally other retired commanders, emailing memos to a number of them providing "talking points" for defending the defense secretary. Four retired generals responded with an op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal* Monday, regurgitating many of the points in the Pentagon memo.

In the same vein, Melvin Laird, a Nixon administration defense secretary, together with Robert Pursley, a retired Air Force lieutenant general and longtime Pentagon aide, published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* Wednesday, warning Rumsfeld's critics to "be mindful of the risks and responsibilities inherent in their acts."

The article concluded with a thinly veiled accusation that those who have spoken out are betraying the US forces in Iraq and aiding and abetting the resistance. "In speaking out now, they may think they are doing a service by adding to the reasoned debate," they wrote. "But the enemy does not understand or appreciate reasoned public debate. It is perceived as a sign of weakness and lack of resolve."

Clearly, this is not the aim of Rumsfeld's military antagonists. For

the most part, they have defended the decision to wage a war of aggression against Iraq, while condemning the defense secretary for failing to follow plans that the military itself had drawn up for the operation—plans that called for the deployment of far greater numbers of troops.

Writing his own op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* Wednesday, John Batiste, the former First Infantry Division commander, spelled out the thinking of many of the military critics. While formally acknowledging that “civilian control of the military is fundamental,” he quickly went on to declare: “We need senior military leaders who are grounded in the fundamental principles of war and who are not afraid to do the right thing. Our democracy depends on it. There are some who advocate that we gag this debate, but let me assure you that it is not in our national interest to do so. We must win this war, and we cannot allow senior leaders to continue to make decisions when their track record is so dismal.”

The present conflict over Rumsfeld—involving pronouncements by generals who, in some cases, have only recently left battlefield commands, and the lining up of other generals in support of the civilian head of the Pentagon—is an ominous political event without precedent in US history. Not even during the military’s disintegration in the Vietnam War era was there such a public confrontation among these layers.

While some of the administration’s apologists have somewhat tentatively raised the principle of civilian control over the military in Rumsfeld’s defense, such efforts are riddled with hypocrisy and insurmountable contradictions. This, after all, is an administration that has claimed unprecedented dictatorial powers for the president by invoking his role as “commander-in-chief.” It has turned this function inside out, from a constitutional provision designed to assure the military’s subordination to an elected government to an assertion of military power over the political life of the country, replete with the unlawful detention of “enemy combatants,” torture of detainees and the creation of military tribunals to circumvent US laws and courts.

Against critics of the Iraq war, the White House has repeatedly insisted that its policy in the occupied country is determined entirely by what the generals say should be done.

Such anti-democratic and militarist tendencies did not begin with Bush, but they have greatly accelerated under his administration.

There has been a steady erosion of civilian control over the military since President Dwight D. Eisenhower left office more than 45 years ago and warned of the growing power of the “military-industrial complex,” which linked uniformed commanders, a massive arms industry and the defense contractors’ political champions.

The relative weight of this “complex” within US society has immensely increased in the years since. There has been a vast growth in military spending and a global eruption of American militarism, with successive administrations utilizing the military in interventions, invasions and wars of aggression.

Today, powerful regional military commanders oversee American operations in the Pacific, the Middle East, and Central Asia, vying with State Department diplomats as the principal architects of US foreign policy.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, the US military has been transformed into an all-volunteer force of professional soldiers, separated from civilian society and unconstrained by the presence of large numbers of draftees who are prone to question and oppose illegal and unprovoked wars. The officer corps has become increasingly politicized, with its overwhelming majority identifying

with the Republican right.

Both political parties compete in soliciting endorsements from retired senior officers, bringing them onto the platforms of their political conventions, something that would have been unimaginable a generation ago.

In the final analysis, the generals’ revolt against Rumsfeld is a symptom of the profound decay of bourgeois democratic forms and institutions in the United States. It bespeaks what could be described as the “Latin Americanization” of US politics.

The timing of the ex-commanders’ public campaign is significant. It comes just months after Democratic Congressman John Murtha of Pennsylvania, one of the lawmakers with the closest ties to the military brass, issued his public call for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq within six months and the prosecution of the war against the Iraqi people by other means: air power, rapid reaction forces, and Special Forces units allied with Kurdish and Shiite forces.

Murtha was treated by a cowardly Democratic leadership as if he were a political leper, and the Republican majority in the House of Representatives responded by engineering a vote on immediate withdrawal which saw only three Democrats out of 200 vote in favor.

In the face of the patent inability and unwillingness of the supposed opposition party to oppose anything, the military has seen fit to bypass the political process and speak out directly.

Now the Democrats are responding by tail-ending the generals. “President Bush’s refusal to recognize that it’s time to make a change and fire Secretary Rumsfeld is symptomatic of his administration’s incompetent and failed leadership,” Karen Finney, Democratic National Committee spokeswoman, said this week.

Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, the second-ranking Democrat in the Senate, called for a “no confidence” vote on Rumsfeld and described the generals’ criticism as a “wake-up call” for Congress.

There is no reason to believe that these developments will wake up the Democrats in Congress to anything. However, the intense conflict within the state apparatus and the increasingly aggressive intervention by representatives of the uniformed military command should serve as a serious warning to the American people.

From its inception, the launching of a war of aggression to control Iraq and its oil wealth and assert US hegemony over the Persian Gulf has been a consensus policy of the American ruling elite, supported by both the Democratic and Republican parties, regardless of tactical differences over how best to carry it out.

Now this policy’s disastrous failure has fueled bitter divisions and a deep political crisis within the ruling establishment, while at the same time laying bare the gulf that separates the two parties and the oligarchy they represent from the vast majority of the population.

The danger posed by an assertive military injecting itself into this political vacuum cannot be ignored. The defense of democratic rights and the struggle to put an end to the war in Iraq and prevent new and even more terrible wars to come require a complete break with the Democratic Party and the development of a new, independent political movement of the working class.



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