

Rumsfeld and the generals: Splits, recriminations over Iraq debacle

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The barrage of public criticism of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld by at least half a dozen retired generals, including several with recent major roles in the US occupation of Iraq, has dealt another serious political blow to the Bush administration. It is a further demonstration of the enormous repercussions produced by failure of the US effort to establish a reliable stooge regime in the oil-rich country.

But even if this criticism was to lead—as it well may—to Rumsfeld’s resignation, it does not represent the emergence of “antiwar” sentiment within the Pentagon brass. Most of the critics defend the initial decision to invade and conquer Iraq, and much of their criticism of Rumsfeld flows from the desire to have more American forces in the Middle East, not fewer.

Moreover, there are troubling implications in the spectacle of high-ranking officers, some retired for only a few months, publicly attacking their civilian superior. It would not be the first time in history that a politicized officer corps responded to a military debacle by seeking to revenge itself on “meddling politicians” and asserting its own independence: Germany after World War I provides the most ominous precedent.

Despite public denials, it seems likely that the round of public criticism was coordinated in advance through private contacts among the officers involved—and undoubtedly with others still on active duty. The first overt attack—and perhaps the signal for the others—was the publication of a new book by retired Marine General Anthony Zinni, who headed the US Central Command, responsible for Central Asia and the Middle East, in the late 1990s. To publicize *The Battle for Peace*, Zinni gave a series of press interviews over the past month, outlining his longstanding opposition to Rumsfeld’s regime in the Pentagon, declaring that the Bush administration has “wasted three years in Iraq” and calling on Rumsfeld to resign.

During the past two weeks, at least five other recently retired generals have denounced Rumsfeld for mismanagement of the Iraq war and military policy as a whole. Retired Army Major General Paul Eaton, head of training of Iraqi army troops in 2003-2004, wrote an op-ed column for the *New York Times* calling Rumsfeld “incompetent strategically, operationally and tactically” and urging him to step down.

The April 9 issue of *Time* magazine carried a scathing column by retired Lieutenant General Gregory Newbold, who left the

military at the end of 2002 after having served as director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2000 through 2002. The Marine general was one of the principal planners of the US war in Afghanistan, but regarded the Bush administration’s decision to go to war in Iraq as a diversion from efforts to destroy the al Qaeda terrorist organization.

He wrote that he retired in December 2002, “in part because of my opposition to those who had used 9/11’s tragedy to hijack our security policy,” adding that because people ignorant of military realities were driving the decision to invade Iraq, “a fundamentally flawed plan was executed for an invented war, while pursuing the real enemy, Al Qaeda, became a secondary effort.”

On Wednesday, April 12, another former Iraq commander chimed in. Retired Major General John Batiste, who commanded the Army’s 1st Infantry Division in Iraq in 2004-2005, gave a series of television interviews attacking Rumsfeld and calling for “a fresh start” in the Pentagon’s top leadership. “We need leadership up there that respects the military as they expect the military to respect them,” he said, adding that officers should be encouraged to voice their views “without intimidation.”

In comments to CNN, Batiste claimed that he represented the thinking of many of those still on active duty. “It speaks volumes that guys like me are speaking out from retirement about the leadership climate in the Department of Defense,” he said. Batiste reportedly declined a promotion to three-star rank and a return to Iraq because of his hostility to Rumsfeld. He had previously served as senior military assistant to deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz, one of the principal architects of the US invasion.

Batiste said, “We went to war with a flawed plan that didn’t account for the hard work to build the peace after we took down the regime. We also served under a secretary of defense who didn’t understand leadership, who was abusive, who was arrogant, and who didn’t build a strong team.” He criticized the administration for violating basic military principles, such as unity of command and insuring there were sufficient forces.

When an interviewer noted that he was criticizing Rumsfeld while not mentioning President Bush, who bears ultimate command responsibility, Batiste said, “My focus is on the

Department of Defense. It's what I know." He said whether the invasion of Iraq was justified was "moot," adding that "we have to succeed" in suppressing Iraqi resistance now.

On Thursday, two more retired generals joined the call for Rumsfeld's ouster: Major General Charles H Swannack Jr., who headed the 82nd Airborne Division, one of the Army's most prestigious commands, serving in Iraq as recently as 2004; and Major General John Riggs, former head of the Pentagon's Objective Force Task Force, overseeing the army's modernization program.

Swannack told the *New York Times* in a telephone interview, "We need to continue to fight the global war on terror and keep it off our shores. But I do not believe Secretary Rumsfeld is the right person to fight that war based on his absolute failures in managing the war against Saddam in Iraq."

He said that Rumsfeld had repeatedly ignored the advice of senior commanders like General George W. Casey and General John P. Abizaid, adding, "My belief is Rumsfeld does not really understand the dynamic of counterinsurgency warfare."

Riggs, a high-ranking military bureaucrat but not a field commander in Iraq, said Rumsfeld had created an "atmosphere of arrogance" in the Pentagon. Most top military officers were opposed to the current leadership he said, because Rumsfeld and his closest aides "have made fools of themselves, and totally underestimated what would be needed for a sustained conflict."

In this extraordinary outburst of public vituperation, the comments of Newbold are perhaps the most significant, reflecting not just resentment over Rumsfeld's bullying personal style—he prides himself on treating military officers the way a corporate CEO treats his underlings—but concern for the effects of the Iraq war debacle on the officer caste as an institution.

Newbold is one of a large layer in the Pentagon, young officers during the Vietnam War, who blamed officials of the Johnson and Nixon administration for mismanaging both the politics and the military tactics of the war, resulting in the loss of public support and the consequent demoralization of the troops and loss of authority on the part of the officer corps.

In relation to Iraq, whatever their opinion about the decision to go to war—Newbold and Zinni opposed it, the others were in support—all these officers fear the impact of the Bush administration's political isolation and want to be sure that the blame for the Iraq disaster falls on the civilian leaders who gave the orders rather than the officers who carried them out.

Newbold hastened to assure his readers that he was not opposed to war, "and while I don't accept the stated rationale for invading Iraq, my view—at the moment—is that a precipitous withdrawal would be a mistake." He listed a series of catastrophic blunders in the Bush administration's handling of the war, and criticized the military leadership itself for failing to object as intelligence was distorted and battle plans were rearranged for political purposes.

He concluded with a broader denunciation of the political establishment in Washington: "Members of Congress—from both parties—defaulted in fulfilling their constitutional responsibility for oversight. Many in the media saw the warning signs and heard cautionary tales before the invasion from wise observers like former Central Command chiefs Joe Hoar and Tony Zinni but gave insufficient weight to their views. These are the same news organizations that now downplay both the heroic and the constructive in Iraq."

The last bitter reference to media criticism of the war sends a dangerous signal. Much of the military brass, as well as the right-wing political milieu, blamed the US defeat in Vietnam on media criticism that supposedly fueled antiwar sentiment. This American version of Hitler's infamous "stab-in-the-back" theory is now echoed both in comments by Vice President Cheney, who recently decried media attention to car-bombings in Baghdad instead of supposed "progress" elsewhere in Iraq, and in Newbold's commentary.

The Bush White House dismissed the extraordinary wartime criticism by the former officers and denied that there was any thought of replacing Rumsfeld. But one well-placed media observer and supporter of the Iraq war—*Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius—cited estimates by Pentagon officials that as many as 75 percent of the officer corps were adamantly opposed to Rumsfeld. Ignatius suggested that the administration might well seek a prominent pro-war congressional figure, possibly Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman, as a replacement.



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