

Rumsfeld is McNamara

Thirty years ago Saigon fell. I was a company commander in the 2nd Battalion, 508th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. When our Vietnam veterans cursed the war, I remembered one of the greatest speeches I ever heard - the day the Vietnam peace was announced to my Winter Ranger class in '73.

The senior Ranger Sergeant cursed everything about the Vietnam War and everyone involved, friend or foe, in a poetic rant of imaginative, sincere, foul-mouthed hatred. He swore most passionately about the waste of his buddies' lives. He blamed everyone and everything he knew to blame for that long war. His comrades died for nothing.

Years later, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara acknowledged that he knew the U.S. could not, or would not, win the Vietnam War. Yet, he stayed in office for years to tinker with technology and management-based theories of guerilla war, while pursuing his fascination with operations research for 'rationalizing' our National Defense. The theories failed, not the soldiers. McNamara didn't know what war to fight. He disputed the Generals on how to fight. He insisted on having his way no matter what.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made the same mistakes in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). The threefold saving grace for Iraq is the absence of a rival Superpower, the geography and GEN. John Abizaid is the Regional Combatant Commander. Our several enemies in Iraq have no sponsor like the Soviet Union. The North Vietnamese could challenge U.S. Forces even if they couldn't defeat them tactically. Iraqi cities and villages can be isolated physically with good fields of fire in the surrounding desert. There are no sanctuaries. Finally, John Abizaid in the Middle East is like Douglas MacArthur in the Far East. Right guy, right place, right time even if he has far less power.

Before 9-11, Secretary Rumsfeld viewed his return to the Department of Defense as an opportunity to get right, finally, what he learned from his first secretariat. But, he learned wrongly. His fixation with one armchair theory of war is based on a fascination with high technology air and space power. Platforms have targeting kill chains and network-centric warfare instead of fighting human will and commander-centric command and control. Rumsfeld had a dogmatic fixation to cut the Army by two divisions and more.

Consequently, the invasion of Iraq was shaped to his theology. GEN (RET) Tommy Franks will insist he had a free hand to plan the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a manhood issue. But, Rumsfeld's final responsibility for accepting a plan that didn't have enough troops as the Army Chief of Staff suggested and failed to have the 4th Infantry Division on the ground from the 'get go' had consequences on the battlefield. The lines of communication weren't secured. The Iraqi Nation wasn't decisively engaged – psychologically with the appearance of allied troops everywhere – even though the Iraqi forces were decisively defeated when they fought.

Additionally, the big shock and awe bombing campaign was a bust. It didn't collapse the regime. It killed civilians and destroyed records that would be very useful for the nationwide intelligence needed to restore security. Clearly, Rumsfeld thought the war meant defeat Hussein and get out. The plans called for a reduction from about 150,000 U.S. troops rapidly down to 30,000. How could the Sec Def not know there would be an Occupation?

The colonels at the Army War College knew it. The Army Chief of Staff, GEN. Eric Shinseki, who was let go, knew it. Just like they knew, and recommended, to keep the Iraqi Army on the payrolls, intact, and selectively weed out the Baathist bad guys.

Rumsfeld didn't understand the fundamentals of the war, which war, OIF was. Our forces on the ground did well to overcome the failures of understanding and planning. But, it cost us.

Rumsfeld rightly pushes a transformation of the Defense Department from the Industrial to Information Age. He has military bureaucrats focus on process to find the right magic for a Blitzkrieg II. The Germans didn't use magic. They experimented using 'military empiricism' to find the best fit of technology, organization and operational concepts. Like the Army has been seizing the intellectual high ground since 1990 to develop the Future Combat Systems. Rumsfeld doesn't get it.

A Sec Def making fundamental errors of judgment on war, despite his skillful recovery, should be fired. He may not understand what war looms when China threatens Taiwan or North Korea threatens South Korea and Japan or elsewhere.

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