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The Donald Rumsfeld I Know

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By Douglas J. Feith
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Much of what you know about Donald Rumsfeld is wrong.

I worked intimately with Rumsfeld for four years, from the summer of 2001 until I left the Pentagon in August 2005. Through countless meetings and private conversations, I came to learn his traits, frame of mind and principles -- characteristics wholly at odds with the standard public depiction of Rumsfeld, particularly now that he has stepped down after a long, turbulent tenure as defense secretary, a casualty of our toxic political climate.

I know that Don Rumsfeld is not an ideologue. He did not refuse to have his views challenged. He did not ignore the advice of his military advisers. And he did not push single-mindedly for war in Iraq. He was motivated to serve the national interest by transforming the military, though it irritated people throughout the Pentagon. Rumsfeld's drive to modernize created a revealing contrast between his Pentagon and the State Department, where Colin Powell was highly popular among the staff. After four years of Powell's tenure at State, the organization chart there would hardly tip anyone off that 9/11 had occurred -- or even that the Cold War was over.

Rumsfeld is a bundle of paradoxes, like a fascinating character in a work of epic literature. And as my high school teachers drummed into my head, the best literature reveals that humans are complex. They are not the all-good or all-bad, all-brilliant or all-dumb figures that inhabit trashy novels and news stories. Fine literature teaches us the difference between appearance and reality.

Because of his complexity, Rumsfeld is often misread. His politics are deeply conservative, but he was radical in his drive to force change in every area he oversaw. He is strong-willed and hard-driving, but he built his defense strategies and Quadrennial Defense Reviews on calls for intellectual humility.

Those of us in his inner circle heard him say, over and over again: Our intelligence, in all senses of the term, is limited. We cannot predict the future. We must continually question our preconceptions and theories. If events contradict them, don't suppress the bad news; rather, change your preconceptions and theories.

If an ideologue is someone to whom the facts don't matter, then Rumsfeld is the opposite of an ideologue. He insists that briefings for him be full of facts, thoughtfully organized and rigorously sourced. He demands that facts at odds with his key policy assumptions be brought to his attention immediately. "Bad news never gets better with time," he says, and berates any subordinate who fails to rush forward to him with such news. He does not suppress bad news; he acts on it.

In late 2002, Pentagon lawyers told Rumsfeld that the detainee interrogation techniques in the old Army field manual were well within the bounds of the Geneva Conventions and U.S. statutes. Detainee information could help us prevent another terrorist attack, and al-Qaeda personnel were trained to resist standard interrogations. So, with the advice of counsel, military officers at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, asked

Rumsfeld to authorize additional techniques thought to fall safely within the bounds of the law. He did so.

Less than a month later, in December 2002, Jim Haynes, the Defense Department's general counsel, brought him the disturbing news that some lawyers in the military departments questioned the legality of the additional techniques. Rumsfeld did not brush off the questions or become defensive. In short order, he directed Haynes to revoke the authority for the new techniques. He told him to gather all the relevant lawyers in the department and review the matter -- and he would not approve any new techniques until that review was completed. It took almost four months.

I was impressed by how quickly Haynes brought the information to Rumsfeld and how Rumsfeld changed course upon receiving it. It seemed to me that if the country's leading civil libertarians had been in on the meetings with us, they would have approved of the way Rumsfeld handled the service lawyers' dissent. This story bears telling because when the cruel and sexually bizarre behavior at Abu Ghraib occurred many months later, critics inaccurately depicted Rumsfeld as disrespectful of laws on detainee treatment.

Rumsfeld's drive to overhaul the Pentagon -- to drop outdated practices and modes of thought -- antagonized many senior military officers and civilian officials in the department. He pushed for doing more with less. He pushed for reorganizing offices and relationships to adapt to a changing world. After 9/11, he created the Northern Command (the first combatant command that included the U.S. homeland within its area of responsibility), a new undersecretary job for intelligence and a new assistant secretary job for homeland defense. Improving civil-military cooperation, Rumsfeld devised new institutions for the Pentagon's top civilian and military officials to work face to face on strategic matters and new venues for all of them to gather a few times a year with the combatant commanders. He also conceived and pushed through a thorough revision of how U.S. military forces are based, store equipment, move and train with partners around the world -- something that was never done before in U.S. history.

When he told organizations to take on new missions, their instinct -- typical of bureaucracies -- was to say they needed more people and more money. Rumsfeld responded: If changes in the world require us to do new things, those changes must also allow us to curtail or end old missions that we continue for no good reason. He made numerous major changes in the Defense Department at the cost of goring a lot of oxen.

On Iraq, Rumsfeld helped President Bush analyze the dangers posed by Saddam Hussein's regime. Given Hussein's history -- starting wars; using chemical weapons against foreign and domestic enemies; and training, financing and otherwise supporting various terrorists -- Rumsfeld helped make the case that leaving him in power entailed significant risks. But in October 2002, Rumsfeld also wrote a list of the risks involved in removing Hussein from power. (I called the list his "parade of horrors" memo.) He reviewed it in detail with the president and the National Security Council. Rumsfeld's warnings about the dangers of war -- including the perils of a post-Hussein power vacuum -- were more comprehensive than anything I saw from the CIA, State or elsewhere.

Though we knew that the risks involved in ousting Hussein were high, it hardly means that Bush made the wrong decision to invade. I believe he made the correct call; we had grounds to worry about the threats Hussein posed, especially after 9/11 reduced our tolerance for security risks. But Rumsfeld helped the president see that he had no risk-free option for dealing with the dangers Hussein posed.

Rumsfeld has been attacked for insisting that troop levels for the Iraq operation be kept low, supposedly out of ideology and contrary to the advice of the military. What I saw, however, was that Rumsfeld questioned standard military recommendations for "overwhelming force." He asked if such force was necessary for the

mission. And he asked what the consequences might be of having a large footprint in Iraq and playing into propaganda about the United States wanting to take over the country.

But Rumsfeld never told Gen. John Abizaid or Gen. Tommy Franks that U.S. Central Command could not have the number of troops that the commanders deemed necessary. Rumsfeld is more politically sensitive than that -- he would never expose himself to the risk of a commander later saying that he had denied him the forces needed. If other generals are unhappy with the troop levels in Iraq, the problem is not that they failed to persuade Rumsfeld, but that they failed to persuade Abizaid or Franks.

Historians will sort out whether Rumsfeld was too pushy with his military, or not pushy enough; whether he micromanaged Ambassador L. Paul Bremer and the Coalition Provisional Authority, or gave them too much slack. I know more about these issues than most people, yet I don't have all the information for a full analysis. I do know, however, that the common view of Rumsfeld as a close-minded man, ideologically wedded to the virtues of a small force, is wrong.

Rumsfeld had to resign, I suppose, because the bitter political debate of recent years has turned him into a symbol. His effectiveness was damaged. For many in Congress and the public, the Rumsfeld caricature dominated their view of the Iraq war and the administration's ability to prosecute it successfully. Even if nominee Robert Gates pursues essentially the same strategy, he may command more public confidence.

What Rumsfeld believed, said and did differs from the caricature. The public picture of him today is drawn from news accounts reflecting the views of people who disapproved of his policies or disliked him. Rumsfeld, after all, can be brutally demanding and tough. But I believe history will be more appreciative of him than the first draft has been. What will last is serious history, which, like serious literature, can distinguish appearance from reality.

djf35@georgetown.edu

Douglas J. Feith, a professor at Georgetown University, served as undersecretary of defense for policy from 2001 to 2005.

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