
Donald Rumsfeld begins his smart, serious, slashing, and self-serving memoir with an epigraph, according it pride of place with a page of its own:

"What one needs in life are the pessimism of intelligence and the optimism of the will."

-Former Belgian ambassador to NATO and dean of the North Atlantic Council, Andre de Staerke

As a Google search reveals, this thought did not originate with Andre de Staerke. In 1929 Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist intellectual, imprisoned by Mussolini, wrote in his notebook: "I am a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will." The quotation, alas, isn't the only "known known" not known by Donald Rumsfeld.

In *Known and Unknown*, Rumsfeld reviews his long career at the center of political power. He was the youngest Secretary of Defense in American history (in the Ford administration) -- and the oldest (under George W. Bush). Rumsfeld was the architect of the nation's military strategy for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And, for a time, he was defender-in-chief against allegations of abuse and torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

Rumsfeld insists that he does not "spend a lot of time in recriminations." *Known and Unknown*, however, plays the blame game. Big time. In an effort to secure his own legacy, it appears,
Rumsfeld is willing to provide what amounts to a devastating critique of the Bush Administration.

It is "a tall order," Rumsfeld acknowledges, to try to convince Americans that it is "worth fighting a long, costly war in a small country so many thousands of miles away." Although he argues, rather persuasively in the case of Afghanistan, that treating terrorism as a problem of law enforcement is inadequate when terrorists have safe harbor in a "failed state," and tweaks Democrats for predicting that American forces would sink into a quagmire if they tried to oust the Taliban, Rumsfeld agrees with many critics of George W. Bush that the phrase "war on terror" overemphasizes the role of the military and confounds a tactic (terrorism) with an enemy (Islamist extremists). And he endorses the proposition that the United States should not "occupy" another nation any longer than is necessary to rid it of Al Qaida, restore order, and effect a transition to an indigenous government, exercising sovereign power. An open-ended U.S. presence, he writes, delays the "hard work required" by local leaders -- and the people themselves -- to build a safe and stable society.

Rumsfeld lays the foreign policy failures of the Bush Administration, especially in Iraq, at the feet of the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department. With "near total confidence" in his conclusions, he recalls, CIA Director George Tenet declared that Iraq had reconstituted facilities for biological and chemical weapons and was "clearly working" on a nuclear weapon. CIA mistakes, he insists, and not lying, account for the warnings about weapons of mass destruction issued by President Bush and Vice President Cheney. They explain why, when asked about WMD, Rumsfeld himself claimed "we know where they are. They're in the area around Tikrit and Baghdad."

The Agency, Rumsfeld reports, did not know that Iraq's infrastructure was falling apart. Unaware that Iraqi police lacked legitimacy, authority, and professional training, CIA staffers suggested that they would be helpful in keeping order. They had no idea that the "Fedayeen Saddam" had been trained in counter-insurgency, had stockpiled weapons and ammunition in nearly every city, town, and village, and would emerge as an irregular army, adding foreign fighters from across the Muslim world to its ranks. Deprived of these knowable knowns, Rumsfeld implies, his Department of Defense could not put in place an effective plan for post-war Iraq.

Under Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, according to Rumsfeld, the State Department rarely got anything right. Without offering an alternative, State expressed misgivings about cooperation with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. Powell and Rice opposed coalition forces entering Kabul. Convinced that Shia, Sunni, and Kurds were too much at odds with one another to run their own country; unwilling to give exiles a role in post-war Iraq; or schedule elections quickly, officials at State subverted the legitimacy of Iraqi leaders -- and fed the insurgency -- by supporting an American-led civil authority that would govern the country for an indefinite period. And, through "brazen" leaks, they "badmouthed the Pentagon all over town."

Even if his account is credible (and knowledgeable observers have already discredited many of his claims), Known and Unknown will not, and should not, not deter critics from pointing a finger -- perhaps a middle finger -- at Rumsfeld himself. After all, he was an ardent advocate of a war that was ill-advised, unnecessary, and costly, responsible, along with Bush and Cheney (his one-time protégé), for using 9/11 as a pretext to launch it. He told the American people, categorically, although it was scarcely a known, that there was "a nexus between terrorist networks like Al Qaeda and terrorist states like Iraq." Rumsfeld hid behind the recommendations of his commanders, when it suited his purposes, and did not replace some of them, even when he knew were not getting the job done. He underestimated the number of troops that would be necessary to win the war and secure the peace. His Department's plan for stabilizing and reconstructing Iraq by installing exiles (including the corrupt Ahmad Chalabi) in positions of power doesn't seem viable, even in hindsight. Nor should Rumsfeld be allowed to escape responsibility for the mistakes of L. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, by contending -- or pretending -- that as "the man on the
ground" Bremer deserved "considerable latitude in decision-making" and that "muddled lines of authority" meant that Bremer only nominally reported to the Secretary of Defense.

Rumsfeld puts a premium on candor. A skilled infighter, with sharp elbows and a tart tongue, he is anything but a wallflower. And he was, let's remember, in charge of "post-combat stability operations." If Rumsfeld believed that neither the American people nor the Iraqis would put up with a "protracted multi-year" occupation, one wonders, why didn't he implement his plan? If prevented from doing so by bureaucrats in striped pants, why didn't he take his case directly to George Bush? If the president overruled him, why didn't he resign?

Those who make decisions, Rumsfeld reminds us, must make them with imperfect knowledge. He's right, of course. But it is essential that leaders in a democracy distinguish clearly between imperfect knowledge and "known knowns" when they are "selling" policies to the people they represent. It's vital as well, as Rumsfeld indicates, that they get the objectives right, set priorities, and define limits. Judged by these standards, the Bush Administration -- and Secretary Rumsfeld -- have a lot to answer for.