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The battle between Donald Rumsfeld and the Pentagon.

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As the ground campaign against Saddam Hussein faltered last week, with attenuated supply lines and a lack of immediate reinforcements, there was anger in the Pentagon. Several senior war planners complained to me in interviews that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his inner circle of civilian advisers, who had been chiefly responsible for persuading President Bush to lead the country into war, had insisted on micromanaging the war's operational details. Rumsfeld's team took over crucial aspects of the day-to-day logistical planning—traditionally, an area in which the uniformed military excels—and Rumsfeld repeatedly overruled the senior Pentagon planners on the Joint Staff, the operating arm of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “He thought he knew better,” one senior planner said. “He was the decision-maker at every turn.”

On at least six occasions, the planner told me, when Rumsfeld and his deputies were presented with operational plans—the Iraqi assault was designated Plan 1003—he insisted that the number of ground troops be sharply reduced. Rumsfeld's faith in precision bombing and his insistence on streamlined military operations has had profound consequences for the ability of the armed forces to fight effectively overseas. “They've got no resources,” a former high-level intelligence official said. “He was so focussed on proving his point—that the Iraqis were going to fall apart.”

The critical moment, one planner said, came last fall, during the buildup for the war, when Rumsfeld decided that he would no longer be guided by the Pentagon's most sophisticated war-planning document, the TPFDL—time-phased forces-deployment list—which is known to planning officers as the tip-fiddle (tip-fid, for short). A TPFDL is a voluminous document describing the inventory of forces that are to be sent into battle, the sequence of their deployment, and the deployment of logistical support. “It's the complete appletart, with many pieces,” Roger J. Spiller, the George C. Marshall Professor of military history at the U.S. Command and General Staff College, said. “Everybody trains and plans on it. It's constantly in motion and always adjusted at the last minute. It's an embedded piece of the bureaucratic and operational culture.” A retired Air Force strategic planner remarked, “This is what we do best—go from A to B—and the tip-fiddle is where you start. It's how you put together a plan for moving into the theatre.” Another former planner said, “Once you turn on the tip-fid, everything moves in an orderly fashion.” A former intelligence officer added, “When you kill the tip-fiddle, you kill centralized military planning. The military is not like a corporation that can be streamlined. It is the most inefficient machine known to man. It's the redundancy that saves lives.”

The TPFDL for the war in Iraq ran to forty or more computer-generated spreadsheets, dealing with everything from weapons to toilet paper. When it was initially presented to Rumsfeld last year for his approval, it called for the involvement of a wide range of forces from the different armed services, including four or more Army divisions. Rumsfeld rejected the package, because it was “too big,” the Pentagon planner said. He insisted that a smaller, faster-moving attack force, combined with overwhelming air power, would suffice. Rumsfeld further stunned the Joint Staff by insisting that he would control the timing and flow of Army and Marine troops to the combat zone. Such decisions are known in the military as R.F.F.s—requests for forces. He, and not the generals, would decide which unit would go when and where.

The TPFDL called for the shipment in advance, by sea, of hundreds of tanks and other heavy vehicles—enough for three or four divisions. Rumsfeld ignored this advice. Instead, he relied on the heavy equipment that was already in Kuwait—enough for just one full combat division. The 3rd Infantry Division, from Fort Stewart, Georgia, the only mechanized Army division that was active inside Iraq last week, thus arrived in the Gulf without its own equipment. “Those guys are driving around in tanks that were pre-positioned. *Their* tanks are sitting in Fort Stewart,” the planner said. “To get more forces there we have to float them. We can't fly our forces in, because there's nothing for them to drive. Over the past six months, you could have floated everything in ninety days—enough for four or more divisions.” The planner added, “This is the mess Rumsfeld put himself in, because he didn't want a heavy footprint on the ground.”

Plan 1003 was repeatedly updated and presented to Rumsfeld, and each time, according to the planner, Rumsfeld said, “‘You've got too much ground force—go back and do it again.’” In the planner's view, Rumsfeld had two goals: to demonstrate the efficacy of precision bombing and to “do the war on the cheap.” Rumsfeld and his two main deputies for war planning, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, “were so enamored of ‘shock and awe’ that victory seemed assured,” the planner said. “They believed that the weather would always be clear, that the enemy would expose itself, and so precision bombings would always work.” (Rumsfeld did not respond to a request for comment.)

Rumsfeld's personal contempt for many of the senior generals and admirals who were promoted to top jobs during the Clinton Administration is widely known. He was especially critical of the Army, with its insistence on maintaining costly mechanized divisions. In his off-the-cuff memoranda, or “snowflakes,” as they're called in the Pentagon, he chafed about generals having “the slows”—a reference to Lincoln's characterization of General George McClellan. “In those conditions—an atmosphere of derision and challenge—the senior officers do not offer their best advice,” a high-ranking general who served for more than a year under Rumsfeld said. One witness to a meeting recalled Rumsfeld confronting General Eric Shinseki, the Army Chief of Staff, in front of many junior officers. “He was looking at the Chief and waving his hand,” the witness said, “saying, ‘Are you *getting* this yet? Are you *getting* this yet?’”

Gradually, Rumsfeld succeeded in replacing those officers in senior Joint Staff positions who challenged his view. “All the Joint Staff people now are handpicked, and churn out products to make the Secretary of Defense happy,” the planner said. “They don't make military judgments—they just respond to his snowflakes.”

In the months leading up to the war, a split developed inside the military, with the planners and their immediate superiors warning that the war plan was dangerously thin on troops and matériel, and the top generals—including General Tommy Franks, the head of the U.S. Central Command, and Air Force General Richard Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—supporting Rumsfeld. After Turkey's parliament astonished the war planners in early March by denying the United States permission to land the 4th Infantry Division in Turkey, Franks initially argued that the war ought to be delayed until the troops could be brought in by another route, a former intelligence official said. “Rummy overruled him.”

Many of the present and former officials I spoke to were critical of Franks for his perceived failure to stand up to his civilian superiors. A former senator told me that Franks was widely seen as a commander who “will do what he's told.” A former intelligence official asked, “Why didn't he go to the President?” A Pentagon official recalled that one senior general used to prepare his deputies for meetings with Rumsfeld by saying, “When you go in to talk to him, you've got to be prepared to lay your stars on the table and walk out. Otherwise, he'll walk over you.”

In early February, according to a senior Pentagon official, Rumsfeld appeared at the Army Commanders' Conference, a biannual business and social gathering of all the four-star generals. Rumsfeld was invited to join the generals for dinner and make a speech. All went well, the official told me, until Rumsfeld, during a question-and-answer session, was asked about his personal involvement in the deployment of combat units, in some cases with only five or six days' notice. To the astonishment and anger of the generals, Rumsfeld denied responsibility. “He said, ‘I wasn't involved,’” the official said. “‘It was the Joint Staff.’”

“We thought it would be fence-mending, but it was a disaster,” the official said of the dinner. “Everybody knew he was looking at these deployment orders. And for him to blame it on the Joint Staff—” The official hesitated a moment, and then said, “It's all about Rummy and the truth.”

According to a dozen or so military men I spoke to, Rumsfeld simply failed to anticipate the consequences of protracted warfare. He put Army and Marine units in the field with few reserves and an insufficient number of tanks and other armored vehicles. (The military men say that the vehicles that they do have have been pushed too far and are malfunctioning.) Supply lines—inevitably, they say—have become overextended and vulnerable to attack, creating shortages of fuel, water, and ammunition. Pentagon officers spoke contemptuously of the Administration's optimistic press briefings. “It's a stalemate now,” the former intelligence official told me. “It's going to remain one only if we can maintain our supply lines. The carriers are going to run out of JDAMS”—the satellite-guided bombs that have been striking targets in Baghdad and elsewhere with extraordinary accuracy. Much of the supply of Tomahawk guided missiles has been expended. “The Marines are worried as hell,” the former intelligence official went on. “They're all committed, with no reserves, and they've never run the LAVs”—light armored vehicles—“as long and as hard” as they have in Iraq. There are serious maintenance problems as well. “The only hope is that they can hold out until reinforcements come.”

The 4th Infantry Division—the Army's most modern mechanized division—whose equipment spent weeks waiting in the Mediterranean before being diverted to the overtaxed American port

in Kuwait, is not expected to be operational until the end of April. The 1st Cavalry Division, in Texas, is ready to ship out, the planner said, but by sea it will take twenty-three days to reach Kuwait. "All we have now is front-line positions," the former intelligence official told me. "Everything else is missing."

Last week, plans for an assault on Baghdad had stalled, and the six Republican Guard divisions expected to provide the main Iraqi defense had yet to have a significant engagement with American or British soldiers. The shortages forced Central Command to "run around looking for supplies," the former intelligence official said. The immediate goal, he added, was for the Army and Marine forces "to hold tight and hope that the Republican Guard divisions get chewed up" by bombing. The planner agreed, saying, "The only way out now is back, and to hope for some kind of a miracle—that the Republican Guards commit themselves," and thus become vulnerable to American air strikes.

"Hope," a retired four-star general subsequently told me, "is not a course of action." Last Thursday, the Army's senior ground commander, Lieutenant General William S. Wallace, said to reporters, "The enemy we're fighting is different from the one we war-gamed against." (One senior Administration official commented to me, speaking of the Iraqis, "They're not scared. Ain't it something? They're not scared.") At a press conference the next day, Rumsfeld and Myers were asked about Wallace's comments, and defended the war plan—Myers called it "brilliant" and "on track." They pointed out that the war was only a little more than a week old.

Scott Ritter, the former marine and United Nations weapons inspector, who has warned for months that the American "shock and awe" strategy would not work, noted that much of the bombing has had little effect or has been counterproductive. For example, the bombing of Saddam's palaces has freed up a brigade of special guards who had been assigned to protect them, and who have now been sent home to await further deployment. "Every one of their homes—and they are scattered throughout Baghdad—is stacked with ammunition and supplies," Ritter told me.

"This is tragic," one senior planner said bitterly. "American lives are being lost." The former intelligence official told me, "They all said, 'We can do it with air power.' They believed their own propaganda." The high-ranking former general described Rumsfeld's approach to the Joint Staff war planning as "McNamara-like intimidation by intervention of a small cell"—a reference to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and his aides, who were known for their challenges to the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam War. The former high-ranking general compared the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Stepford wives. "They've abrogated their responsibility."

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of last week was the failure of the Shiite factions in southern Iraq to support the American and British invasion. Various branches of the Al Dawa faction, which operate underground, have been carrying out acts of terrorism against the Iraqi regime since the nineteen-eighties. But Al Dawa has also been hostile to American interests. Some in American intelligence have implicated the group in the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, which cost the lives of two hundred and forty-one marines. Nevertheless, in the months before the war the Bush Administration courted Al Dawa by including it among the opposition groups that would control postwar Iraq. "Dawa is one group that could kill Saddam," a former American intelligence official told me. "They hate Saddam because he suppressed the Shiites. They exist to kill Saddam." He said that their apparent decision to stand with the Iraqi regime now was a "disaster" for us. "They're like hard-core Vietcong."

There were reports last week that Iraqi exiles, including fervent Shiites, were crossing into Iraq by car and bus from Jordan and Syria to get into the fight on the side of the Iraqi government. Robert Baer, a former C.I.A. Middle East operative, told me in a telephone call from Jordan, "Everybody wants to fight. The whole nation of Iraq is fighting to defend Iraq. Not Saddam. They've been given the high sign, and we are courting disaster. If we take fifty or sixty casualties a day and they die by the thousands, they're still winning. It's a jihad, and it's a good thing to die. This is no longer a secular war." There were press reports of mujahideen arriving from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Algeria for "martyrdom operations."

There had been an expectation before the war that Iran, Iraq's old enemy, would side with the United States in this fight. One Iraqi opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmed Chalabi, has been in regular contact with the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, an umbrella organization for Shiite groups who oppose Saddam. The organization is based in Iran and has close ties to Iranian intelligence. The Chalabi group set up an office last year in Tehran, with the approval of Chalabi's supporters in the Pentagon, who include Rumsfeld, his deputies Wolfowitz and Feith, and Richard Perle, the former chairman of the Defense Policy Board. Chalabi has repeatedly predicted that the Tehran government would provide support, including men and arms, if an American invasion of Iraq took place.

Last week, however, this seemed unlikely. In a press conference on Friday, Rumsfeld warned Iranian militants against interfering with American forces and accused Syria of sending military equipment to the Iraqis. A Middle East businessman who has long-standing ties in Jordan and Syria—and whose information I have always found reliable—told me that the religious government in Tehran "is now backing Iraq in the war. There isn't any Arab fighting group on the ground in Iraq who is with the United States," he said.

There is also evidence that Turkey has been playing both sides. Turkey and Syria, who traditionally have not had close relations, recently agreed to strengthen their ties, the businessman told me, and early this year Syria sent Major General Ghazi Kanaan, its longtime strongman and power broker in Lebanon, to Turkey. The two nations have begun to share intelligence and to meet, along with Iranian officials, to discuss border issues, in case an independent Kurdistan emerges from the Iraq war. A former U.S. intelligence officer put it this way: "The Syrians are coordinating with the Turks to screw us in the north—to cause us problems." He added, "Syria and the Iranians agreed that they could not let an American occupation of Iraq stand."♦