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Sidney Blumenthal: How Bush Rules

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The Decider

APRIL 19, 2006

THE ANALOGY BETWEEN IRAQ and Vietnam has proved to be most compelling to the generals who planned and conducted the invasion of Iraq. They kept to themselves their profound disquiet about the rapid rejection of the original plan for invasion, one that had taken ten years to develop; the inadequate downsized force; the absence of preparation for the occupation; and the disastrous decision to disband the Iraqi military.

Almost all these generals voted for George W. Bush in 2000 as a statement of conservatism; they never expected radicalism. Serving their civilian neoconservative superiors, they endured contempt. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's closest aide, Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence Stephen Cambone, joked that the problems of the Army "could be solved by lining up fifty of its generals in the Pentagon and gunning them down," report Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor in their new book on the Iraq invasion, *Cobra II*. It was the sort of joke that Uday Hussein could have made. On September 10, 2001, Rumsfeld held a Pentagon town meeting at which he declared the "bureaucracy"—the career military professionals—to be "a serious threat to the security of the United States."

The generals have been wary of engaging in public debate for fear of being misconstrued as politically motivated. But they are haunted by Vietnam and deeply influenced by H. R. McMaster's 1997 book, *Dereliction of Duty*, which argues that the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Vietnam era failed in their constitutional responsibility to object strenuously to misguided strategies. (McMaster is currently a colonel serving in Iraq.) As the generals have stepped forward, one by one, to demand the resignation of Secretary Rumsfeld, they have spoken in the language of McMaster's book.

On March 19, retired army Major General Paul Eaton, who was in charge of training the Iraqi army, said Rumsfeld is "incompetent strategically, operationally and tactically, and is far more than anyone responsible for what has happened to our important mission in Iraq."

On April 2, retired marine General Anthony Zinni, former chief of U.S. Central Command, said, “Poor military judgment has been used throughout this mission.”

On April 9, retired marine Lieutenant General Gregory Newbold, the former director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote: “Inside the military family, I made no secret of my view that the zealots’ rationale for war made no sense. . . . But I now regret that I did not more openly challenge those who were determined to invade a country whose actions were peripheral to the real threat—al-Qaeda.”

On April 12, retired army Major General John Batiste, who commanded the 1st Infantry Division in Iraq and was the military aide to the former deputy secretary of defense, Paul Wolfowitz, said: “Decisions are made without taking into account sound military recommendations.” He described Rumsfeld as “abusive” and went on national television to denounce the Bush administration’s “axis of arrogance.”

The next day, retired army Major General John Riggs and Major General Charles Swannack, the former commander of the 82nd Airborne, went public. “They only need the military advice when it satisfies their agenda,” said Riggs. Swannack emphasized that Rumsfeld bore “culpability” for the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

In response, the Bush administration has mounted a full-scale PR defense. On Monday, Rumsfeld appeared in the guise of King Solomon on the radio talk show of the right-wing Rush Limbaugh: “This, too, will pass,” he said. On Tuesday Bush proposed a syllogism: “I’m the decider, and I decide what’s best. And what’s best is for Don Rumsfeld to remain.”

But the revolt of the generals, speaking for much of the serving senior officer corps, is unprecedented in scope and depth. Its roots lie in the military’s anguish over Vietnam, but the past has become urgent because of the present.

While the White House press secretary, Scott McClellan, resigns, Rumsfeld stays. Clinging to Rumsfeld as indispensable to his strength, Bush reveals his fragility. The two men prefer not to understand that time and opportunity lost can never be regained. Their denial extends beyond the realities of Iraq and its history to the history of the United States. It is extremely peculiar that they have learned no lessons of nation building from the tragedy of failed political leadership during post-Civil War Reconstruction, whose collapse consigned African Americans to second-class citizenship for a century. Bush & Co. disdain nation building as something soft and weak connected to the Clinton presidency, just as they belittled

and neglected terrorism as a Clinton obsession before September 11 and as the president dismissed history itself as weightless.

“History? We don’t know. We’ll all be dead,” Bush remarked in 2003. “We cannot escape history,” said Abraham Lincoln. The living president has already sealed his reputation in history.