

The Revolt of the Generals

Army, September 2006, John S. Brown

A number of our recently retired colleagues have publicly stated that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld should resign. These critics assert that Rumsfeld has a flawed personality, micromanages and is botching the war in Iraq. Are there longer term historical issues at play? What can these critics reasonably hope to achieve?

Our colleagues characterize Rumsfeld as arrogant, rude and dismissive. If true, he holds traits in common with Pershing, MacArthur and Patton-and with some senior officers of more recent vintage. The military has no monopoly on abusive leadership, of course. Corporate leaders champion stockholders far more so than employees, and political leaders are too often strident and polarized. Some social commentators tell us American society as a whole is ruder than ever. Inside the military or out, the resulting unpleasantness is seldom a brake on successful careers-as long as results valued by the respective organizations are achieved.

Micromanagement is another phenomenon broader than Rumsfeld. Field surveys routinely establish that junior officers and NCOs consider themselves micromanaged and subject to zero defects mentalities. These lieutenants and sergeants are not talking about the secretary of Defense. To our credit, we do mount never-ending educational efforts to keep internal tendencies towards micromanagement under control. At the most senior levels, several developments over the past generation have made us ever more vulnerable to micromanagement from our civilian leadership, should it be so inclined.

First, the secretariat has grown in numbers and pervasiveness, and is involved in decisions echelons below historical precedent. Several decades ago two thinly staffed assistant secretaries of the Army were juxtaposed to about as many uniformed DA staff principals as there are now. The role of the secretariat was to supervise broadly and to run interference with the White House and Congress. We now count 10 senior political appointees on the DA staff principals list, and most are well staffed. In fairness, these generally are diligent and talented public servants, but they introduce internal political complexities not heretofore characteristic of running the Army.

A second enabler of micromanagement has been our profession's abdication of its role as the sole legitimate source of military knowledge. Pressed by staffing and circumstance, we increasingly have relied upon external think tanks and contractors rather than the internal genius of our staffs, school systems and cadre to do serious thinking for us. This has been convenient, but dysfunctional. If civilian leaders can contract for military advice from the same places we would get it, why should they listen to us?

Third, a commendable zeal for jointness may have gone too far. The centralized growth of joint and defense agencies has produced dependencies and marginalization within the services. The relative service autonomy of earlier eras may have been less efficient, but often was more effective.

Finally, modern communications provide virtually everyone the technical means to involve themselves in everyone else's business all the time.

Given unprecedented means to micromanage, if used, can the frustrations of Operation Iraqi Freedom be laid at Rumsfeld's feet? A recurrent complaint is that he committed too few troops. It is hoped that we remember the extent to which the limits of the Kuwaiti infrastructure, the intransigence of Turkey and the operational attractions of a "rolling start" affected force structure going in. We might also recall President Lincoln's defense of secretary of War Edwin Stanton when Gen. George McClellan upbraided him for not sending more troops to the Peninsula: "The secretary of War is not to blame for not giving troops to McClellan. He had no troops to give." We may be a nation at war, but for reasons that transcend Rumsfeld we are not on a traditional wartime footing-and perhaps should not be. Iraq is our first sustained overseas combat with a volunteer Army since the average of 25,000 required to secure the Philippines in 1899-1902.

There are limits to the numbers of volunteers we can recruit in wartime. We had to choose between fielding several hundreds of thousands in Iraq once, or rotating somewhat more than a hundred thousand at a time indefinitely. Planning for a long haul accorded with our historical experience of low-intensity conflict. Our rotations of units in and out of Iraq are the largest such enterprises in our history. Given that we already moved combat units through Iraq at will and totally outclassed any adversary who chose to actually fight us, what advantage would more soldiers who didn't understand the culture and didn't speak the language have given us? The most earnest personnel manhunt early on were for interpreters, not manpower.

The approved solution has always been to shift security responsibilities to the Iraqis. Gen. Jay Garner, Rumsfeld's choice to effect the transition in Iraq, had modest expectations with respect to deBaathification and the makeover of the Iraqi army. It was Ambassador Paul Bremer who superseded Garner and fired the Baathists as a whole and the entire Iraqi army within a day's time. He did so for reasons that may make sense in the long run, but certainly created difficulties in the short run. By that time our vision of responsibilities towards Iraq was rather different from the one with which we entered the campaign. Everyone knew we were thin on the ground for such an enlarged mission. Rumsfeld's gamble has been that our troops are so good, their leadership so capable and our objectives so agreeable to the mass of the Iraqi people that we will ultimately succeed in the hand-off despite the thinness of our numbers. He has not yet been proved wrong.

While respecting their moral courage, we might reasonably ask what our colleagues hope to achieve. "Revolts" against civilian superiors by generals and admirals have been infrequent, and rarely have gone well or accomplished much. An exception lies in the resignations of Generals Matthew Ridgway, Maxwell Taylor and James Gavin to protest the Eisenhower administration's "new look," which threatened to gut the Army and rely upon strategic weapons alone to keep the peace. Each of these three wrote a thoughtful book-Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway; The Uncertain Trumpet; and War and Peace in the Space Age, respectively-outlining their visions of what the defense paradigm should look like. Collectively considered, these became the basis for the full spectrum "flexible response" that served us so well through the rest of the Cold War.

There may be a lesson in the Kidgway, Taylor and Gavin example. Having gone so far as to revolt, our colleagues owe us more than character assassination. What is their vision for a better defense posture? How would they address the longer term sources of their complaints? What policies would they change? What would they do differently now with respect to Iraq and the global war on terrorism? One of them, possibly assisted by the others, should write a book.

Recommended Reading:

Fontenot, Gregory, et al., *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004)

Gavin, James M., *War and Peace in the Space Age* (New York: Harper, 1958)

Sherry, Mark, *The Army Command Post and Defense Reshaping, 1987-1997* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2006)

Taylor, Maxwell D., *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper, 1959)

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