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RUMSFELD'S BIGGEST UNKNOWN

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

The knives are out in Donald Rumsfeld's new memoir, "Known and Unknown." In defense of his long public service career and the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the man who was both the youngest and oldest Defense Secretary clearly believes that a good offense is the best strategy.

While the book is receiving press for the intra-cabinet fights and for Rumsfeld cherry-picking his facts, it ends up being a useful and needed work: In eviscerating fellow members of President George W. Bush's national security team, Rumsfeld raises questions about how the most critical parts of the executive branch operate.

With the relentlessly negative portrayals of political and military figures and constant complaints about the press and the legislature, it is not obvious that Rumsfeld is looking to make a larger point other than defending his tenure and slashing at adversaries. And slash he does — among the many, many bold-faced names who receive unwelcome shout-outs are long-time Rumsfeld foe George H.W. Bush, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, John McCain, Al Gore (he even takes an early whack at Gore's father), Jerry Bremer, Eric Shinseki, and, in a golden oldies moment, Nixon's counsel John Ehrlichman. His assessment of Ehrlichman may be the best line in the book, noting, "Certainty without power can be interesting, and even amusing. Certainty with power can be dangerous."

What gives some of these criticisms weight is Rumsfeld's highlighting of flawed presidential operations. He starts with citing mismanagement with the one president who he greatly respects and admires, Gerald Ford. Rumsfeld keeps coming back to the mismanagement theme. At the end of his tenure in the Bush Administration, he notes: "After five years back in government, wrestling with natural and man-made disasters as well as two wars, it became clear to me that our government institutions were proving inadequate to the challenges of the twenty-first century and the information age."

The critiques multiply with a series of attacks on the Army leadership, the intelligence community, on Colin Powell and the State Department. Unfortunately, the question of what are the proper roles of the State and Defense departments in a modern war and its aftermath are not answered by Rumsfeld in this book. His complaints, though, don't seem that much different from the usual battles that many Defense and State Departments wage in other administrations.

Rumsfeld's attacks on Rice and her tenure as National Security Advisor are of another order. Rumsfeld argues that Rice fundamentally misconstrued the position of the National Security Agency, not understanding that her job was not to "issue orders, provide guidance, or give tasks to combat commanders." In Rumsfeld's view, Rice injected herself into policy rather than being an organizer and neutral arbitrator.

According to Rumsfeld, Rice put a “premium on harmony” and trying to bridge differences between agencies as she “studiously avoided forcing clear-cut decisions that might result in one cabinet officer emerging as a ‘winner’ and another as a ‘loser.’ ” Rumsfeld argues that this approach cut off the “vigorous debate” necessary to come up with the best possible policy and resulted in “fundamental differences … unaddressed and unresolved by the President.” Is this not also a major indictment of Bush’s management style?

The book isn’t just a slash and burn epic. Rumsfeld, who was first elected to Congress in 1962 and ran for president in 1988 and was mentioned for the vice presidency four separate times, goes through his career, pointing out some surprises from the longtime Republican. He claims Adlai Stevenson as his original inspiration for public service; he cites Democratic Congressman John Dingell as a friend, and, even more surprisingly, talks about his friendship with former Congressman Allard Lowenstein, one of the leaders of the anti-war left. When he went down at the end of his tenure, he looks to Harry Truman for inspiration.

Of course, most of the book is about the War on Terror — a title Rumsfeld dislikes. He lays out his case in detail and in depth, starting off explaining his 1983 meeting with Saddam Hussein. He goes on to talk about the pivotal moment in the U.S. Middle East policy, the pullout of the troops following the Beirut Marine Barracks bombing in 1983, 9/11 and the wars. There’s no mea culpa on Iraq or Afghanistan — were you really expecting one? — but he is probably not changing any minds with his arguments.

Of everything Rumsfeld chooses to discuss in his book, there are two important unknowns he glosses over: Why did America go into Iraq with too few troops? And, why, after the war took a turn for the worse, did it take so long for the surge? Rumsfeld barely attempts to answer those two critical questions.

Rumsfeld claims that the need for a light footprint was the reason America went in with so few troops. He decides not to acknowledge that this might have been a disastrous miscalculation, even though before the original invasion Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki warned Congress that the U..S needed many more boots on the ground to succeed – and this was not a solo opinion.

Instead, Rumsfeld goes on the offensive with Shinseki, saying that Shinseki and the Marine Corp Commandant James L. Jones were cited in the Washington Post as being “opposed to the war in Iraq.” You be the judge if the article says that, or if instead Shinseki was laying out some reasonable questions, especially about the post-war planning.

Rumsfeld came into office with an admirable goal — to make the military faster, lighter and more mobile, for which he gives credit to Bush, but was also clearly his own. His position of lighter and faster seemed validated in the early days of Afghanistan and Iraq. But when his ideology clashed with the reality on the ground in Iraq, he sided with his ideology. The result was disastrous.

Unfortunately for the reader, Rumsfeld also misses an opportunity to turn his book into a classic of a different type. He is known as the bureaucratic infighter par-excellence. But what is unknown is how he does it. Rumsfeld could have let us in on the secrets of success in bureaucratic warfare. He could have written the Plunkitt of Tammany Hall for the Inside-the-Beltway Set. A practical guide could have limitless applications in both government and business. Instead, these secrets of success remain hidden.

“Known and Unknown” is very much the world according to Donald Rumsfeld. He is not going to win many hearts and minds in his retelling of the war. But his arguments lay out claims on how the executive branch should be run that need to be answered. Perhaps that could be his next book.