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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld

Tuesday, April 20, 2004

Secretary Rumsfeld Interview with Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes, Fox News

SEAN HANNITY: And welcome to Hannity and Colmes. Thank you for being with us. I'm Sean Hannity coming to you from Washington, DC, tonight. We'll get right to our top story: reaction to Bob Woodward's book, "Plan of Attack: The Behind the Scenes Account of the Bush Administration's Decision to Invade Iraq."

The White House is now challenging some of Woodward's reporting, and tonight in an exclusive interview Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a key figure in the book, responds.

Mr. Secretary, it's always good to see you. Thank you for being with us.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Thank you. It's good to be with you.

MR. HANNITY: All right, there's this new book out. It mentions you a lot. You haven't had a chance to read it.

SEC. RUMSFELD: You don't believe everything you read, do you?

MR. HANNITY: I do not believe everything I read.

SEC. RUMSFELD: I have not read it. I have skimmed some of the articles in the papers that report on the book, but I have not had a chance to see the book.

MR. HANNITY: It was interesting, though, because I did read your interview that you gave I believe it was September 20th.

SEC. RUMSFELD: We released it to the press.

MR. HANNITY: You released it to the press. Right. It was somewhat contentious with Bob Woodward – a little bit.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Well, I've known him over the years and I've been interviewed for his last book. I declined and the president asked me to please do it, so I work for the president, so I did it. And this time I declined again and the president asked me to do it, so I did it.

MR. HANNITY: Did you feel you were treated fairly the first time?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I never read his book, but what I read in the papers seemed to me to be, you know, some accurate and some not. It's the context of things and I've never written a book so I can't say that I

could do better, but it's probably a difficult thing to do.

MR. HANNITY: Let me ask you – let's go back to where he starts his book, which is the day before Thanksgiving, November 21st, 2001, 72 days after 9/11 and the president – you're meeting with the National Security Council and his advisors and after this meeting the president pulls you aside. Tell us what happened in that meeting.

SEC. RUMSFELD: I don't remember the date. I do remember that at the end of a meeting with the president in the Situation Room – I think it was a National Security Council meeting – the president said, I'd like to see you for a minute. And we went off into a little room nearby the Situation Room in the White House and he asked me what the status of the planning for contingencies in Iraq happened to be and I responded that I had looked at it and it was in my view stale.

And I should say, however, that there have been at least four other occasions when he has asked me to look at contingency plans and asked me the status of contingency plans, so this was not a unique thing. That is what the Pentagon does is to prepare contingency plans. And it's what the president should do, and he does do, and that is to say interest himself in them and want to feel confident that the Department of – his Department of Defense – our country's Department of Defense has studied and analyzed and prepared contingency approaches for the kinds of things that our country needs to be ready to face.

And so it was a perfectly appropriate thing for the president to be asking and it was, as I say, not anything that was distinctively different from the three or four or five other times he's asked me the same question about totally different parts of the world.

MR. HANNITY: It would almost be irresponsible if he didn't ask.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Exactly.

MR. HANNITY: You asked – so apparently there was an opportunity – this is five days after September 11th, the president indicated to Condoleezza Rice that while we had to do Afghanistan first he was determined at that time, even early on, to consider and look at the issue of Iraq and Saddam Hussein and you're quoted as saying that this is an opportunity to take out Saddam, we should consider it – five days after Iraq. Did you think at that time that he was connected to the 9/11 attack?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I don't remember ever saying anything like that and I doubt that I did. I don't know who suggested I did. Certainly I didn't say anything like that to –

MR. HANNITY: That's actually a quote.

SEC. RUMSFELD: – to Woodward. Of course, but there are quotes all over these books that people write that are not from the individual who said – who may or may not have said something; they're from somebody who either heard that somebody said something or somebody who was in the room and is – vaguely remembers that they said something like that, but the short answer is I don't remember ever saying anything like that.

Now, the context of the situation is interesting. If you think about it, the president came in January 20th. At that moment, and before, the United States of America's aircraft were being fired on by Saddam Hussein. It was the only place in the world that any country was firing on U.S. pilots and aircraft and flight crews with impunity or near impunity, and it struck me as a bad thing that the Iraqis were firing at British and U.S. aircraft as we were enforcing the UN resolutions in the northern no-fly zone in Iraq and the southern no-fly zone in Iraq.

And I was, needless to say, understandably concerned about the possibility that one of our planes would be hit, that we could end up having a crew downed, either killed or taken hostage. So we worried through the questions of what do we do in that case and we spent a good deal of time on a codenamed procedure that we would undertake in the event a plane was shot down. When they were shot at, but not

shot down, we had various response options, one of which you may recall occurred when the president was with Vicente Fox in Mexico in early February, so the president had every reason in the world to be thinking about Iraq, as did I. And we in the Pentagon have every reason in the world to be developing contingency plans as to how we would deal with those various events.

MR. HANNITY: The Woodward book actually chronicles some discussions and actually spirited debate that you had with Secretary Powell at the time over issues as you're describing and even over the purchase of these expensive trucks because they could be used as cylinders to fire missiles at either American troops or over at Israel. Do you remember those moments?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I don't. I haven't seen that reference and I don't recall what that might be referring to.

MR. HANNITY: Let me get to the point that you and Tommy Franks worked out a deal as it relates to money because there's been some controversy and your good friend Senator Ted Kennedy was railing about it earlier today.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Is that right?

MR. HANNITY: Yes, he was, over what Woodward refers to as the end of July – end of July, 2002, where \$700 million would have been a large amount of money to get – start building runways and pipelines, et cetera, and preparations in Kuwait for the possibility or potential of war. Woodward concludes that some people could look at a document called the Constitution, which says no money will be drawn from the treasury without the approval of Congress. Congress was totally in the dark about that.

Is that –

SEC. RUMSFELD: There's a – I haven't read his book.

MR. HANNITY: Yes.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Let's say that he said exactly what you said he said.

MR. HANNITY: I just quoted him.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Good. That's wrong. It's just his – for whatever reason – has written something that isn't so. It is a misunderstanding of the situation. The funds that come from the Congress under the Constitution have to be accounted for and in this instance I am sure they were. It is – there are a whole set of complexities as to how it's done – what they're authorized for. Some have quite narrow purposes, others have much broader purposes. We have a wonderful group of people in the (sic comptroller) shop in the Department of Defense who spend an enormous amount of time consulting with members of the Congress and the appropriations committees in the House and Senate and their staffs making sure that they understand what we're doing.

We also have the advantage of the Office of Management and Budget that we work closely with, and before we propose anything to the Congress we go to the OMB and they look at it and say yes they agree that that fits the law or it doesn't.

MR. HANNITY: Would it be general war on terror, then, spending –

SEC. RUMSFELD: I don't know what he was talking about because I haven't read the book, but there's no question there were sums of money that were authorized by Congress for various things; some more broadly, some quite narrowly, and I'm sure that when we have a chance to go back and find out what he may or may not have been talking about that we'll find that the extensive consultation with Congress covered those items.

MR. HANNITY: And coming up, more of my exclusive interview with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and then terrorism, Iraq, North Korea. The world is a very dangerous place, so who is better prepared to handle the threat: George W. Bush or John Kerry? And then we'll go live tonight to the war zone where our own Oliver North is with our Marines in the city ...

(Commercial break.)

ALAN COLMES: Welcome back to Hannity and Colmes. I'm Alan Colmes. Coming up later, Oliver North joins us live from Iraq. First, the Bush administration is refuting parts of Bob Woodward's new book, "Plan of Attack." We now continue with Sean's exclusive sit-down with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

MR. HANNITY: Back to the issue of money here. Just talking off-mike for a second here, the \$700 million was Tommy Franks' request, and specifically you recall that?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I do. I've been since told that General Franks came in with a request for something in that range and our people then disaggregated those sums and looked at them and said, well, these fit within the broader global war on terror, these fit within things that you're doing – the Central Command is doing with respect to Afghanistan, and these would be totally Iraq related and we can't do those.

MR. HANNITY: Okay.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Without the approval of the Congress.

MR. HANNITY: So you specifically looked at what would fit under the broader war on terror model or mode?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I'm told that that's exactly what happened by the (sic comptroller) shop and the Office of Management and Budget.

MR. HANNITY: There seems to be within the administration – and probably this is a healthy thing – spirited debate as you contemplate something as complicated as a war and sending brave American men and women to fight. But it appears in the book of Woodward – it describes Vice President Cheney as a powerful, steamrolling force obsessed with Saddam and taking him out and Colin Powell, the secretary of state, saying that he had a fever about war.

Do you recall it that way?

SEC. RUMSFELD: No, I certainly don't. (Laughter.)

MR. HANNITY: Not at all.

SEC. RUMSFELD: I guess that's the things of which novels are made. The – all the emotion that people can pack into a sentence like that. I mean, I was in all these meetings I'm sure and I've read something in the paper yesterday that alleged that Colin Powell was cut out of some issues or something, which just isn't true. He was involved all throughout the entire course of it, as he has since testified to. But Vice President Cheney is a very measured, generally quiet, thoughtful person. The idea of him having a fever over something just doesn't compute for me.

MR. HANNITY: But so the idea that the president told Condoleezza Rice, told yourself, that Cheney knew, and that somehow Colin Powell, the secretary of state, was not told or was told after Prince Bandar –

SEC. RUMSFELD: Just not true.

MR. HANNITY: That isn't accurate?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Can't be. Can't be. Now I was in so many meetings with the president, the vice president, Colin Powell, Condi Rice, George Tenet, and Don Rumsfeld that from the outset – I didn't know the president had made a decision to go to war until he indicated to me that he had, which was very, very late.

MR. HANNITY: It wasn't in January, it was more towards March?

SEC. RUMSFELD: He was still hopeful that the UN process and the diplomacy would lead Saddam Hussein to acquiesce and even at the last minute he proposed a – an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein that he leave the country, hoping that war could be averted.

MR. HANNITY: Was Secretary Powell the – more of the reluctant warrior in a – do you remember him saying you're going to own this place? You've got to understand that.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Oh, I never heard things like that.

MR. HANNITY: Never?

SEC. RUMSFELD: But he is an able man and – as is the vice president, and there always would be discussion and that's healthy. The president would solicit different views. I mean, I can remember sitting down in a meeting and presenting a whole long list of things that could go wrong.

MR. HANNITY: Yeah.

SEC. RUMSFELD: And trying to make – as everyone did, trying to make sure that there was a full awareness of the difficulties, the problems, and no one with any sense rushes into war. It's so uncertain, and we all know that.

MR. HANNITY: I did read that you had written down what the downside was from the very beginning, but let me just give you a quote here. And he talks about this specifically that two days before the president told Secretary Powell, Dick Cheney and you had already briefed Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador. That is false?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I just cannot believe that. Now I'm one person. I'm not in every meeting that the Secretary Powell was in or every meeting that the president was in, but I was in a meeting and I do not even remember in that meeting that Prince Bandar was told that the president had made such a decision. I don't remember hearing that.

I remember the discussion and the meeting.

MR. HANNITY: And you briefed Prince Bandar?

SEC. RUMSFELD: There were four of us: Prince Bandar, the vice president, and General Myers, and myself. And there were issues that were raised about Saudi Arabia and various other things, but certainly I was never in a position, nor was General Myers, to communicate a decision on the part of the president which to my knowledge at that point he hadn't even made.

MR. COLMES: And we'll have more of Sean's interview with Donald Rumsfeld later in the show. We'll find out what the president wanted to know before he gave the final approval to go to war. And tomorrow night we'll be talking to Bob Woodward about his new book, "Plan of Attack." Coming up, Bush versus Kerry: who do you think is better prepared to deal with the rest of the world as president? We'll talk with former Assistant Secretary of State Jamie Ruben.

(Portions of broadcast not dealing with interview of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld deleted.)

MR. COLMES: ...up to war, who was in the loop and why. And here's more of Sean's exclusive interview with Donald Rumsfeld. Sean asked the defense secretary why it was important to get countries like Saudi Arabia on board with the war plan.

MR. HANNITY: As it relates, Mr. Secretary, to Prince Bandar, why would it be appropriate to brief him even if the decision, as you said in the last segment, wasn't made to go to war yet? Why would we brief him?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Well, first of all you can be sure that the – there was no way the United States efforts in the United Nations and the diplomacy building up to the war could be credible unless the – there were a – happened to be a flow of forces supporting that diplomacy. As a result, the president asked the Department of Defense to have the forces flow in a way that would be supportive of the diplomacy – that would be credible to Saddam Hussein in the outside hope that he would decide to cooperate with the inspectors.

To do that required the cooperation of some of the neighboring countries. That means you had to then have discussions with them about how might we be able to use some of your capabilities, whether it's real estate or airfields or ports or cooperation or overflight rights, and we had to talk to a lot of countries, which we did, over a sustained period of many, many months. And in the course of that, the way you do that is you meet with either the country's leadership or their ambassadors and obviously in the case of Prince Bandar he has a relationship here with a great many people and we spoke to him.

MR. HANNITY: Let's move us or take us into the decision where you have these people who are CIA operatives within Saddam's regime – 87 of them. And walk us through the rock stars if you will.

SEC. RUMSFELD: I think I wouldn't characterize them as CIA operatives.

MR. HANNITY: No? Okay.

SEC. RUMSFELD: I think they're probably better characterized as sources.

MR. HANNITY: Okay, sources would be a better characterization.

SEC. RUMSFELD: You wouldn't want to leave the impression that they were employees of the Central Intelligence Agency as such.

MR. HANNITY: I stand corrected.

SEC. RUMSFELD: They may have been contacts or people that were – they were working with.

MR. HANNITY: They had – I know they had satellite phones and we're informing our government.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Right. Exactly.

MR. HANNITY: But they were called or referred to as rock stars, but the decision to take this moment of opportunity that we thought we had Saddam Hussein. Walk us through that process.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Well, one afternoon – mid-afternoon, George Tenet came over and said he had to see me and he walked into the office with a team of people and they laid out on the table some intelligence they had and a possibility that they saw of being able to attack a location – where command and control type location where senior people in that regime were thought to be present.

We spent a good deal of time – an hour and a half or two – talking about it and discussing it and trying to analyze it and we then decided it was worth taking over to the president and he and I then went over with his team and, I believe, General Myers to meet with the president. And we then had a lengthy

discussion with the president and discussed the pros and cons and the nature of the intelligence and what its strengths and weaknesses were. He gave it a great deal of thought, asked a great many questions, and at some moment we decided that it was worth launching some aircraft to – because it was a good distance from where the aircraft were located, and we could always recall the aircraft. You can't recall a cruise missile or something like that, but you can recall an aircraft – a piloted aircraft, so we sent the aircraft up and they were en route before the decision was made.

The decision was then made by the president. I went in and talked to General Franks on the phone and authorized the strike at the president's request, and the strike was executed. And then, of course, some considerable time later the information came back that he very likely had not been there. That's the nature of this business. It's a tough business.

MR. HANNITY: It is a tough business. One last question: the moment when you were in the Situation Room and you had all these monitors and General Franks, all nine commanders were there, you were at this meeting and president asked the questions are you ready? Do you have what you need? Are you satisfied? And they all said, yes, sir, we're ready. You were ready at that point. And he reports that the president saluted, rose from his chair, and that you could see him welling up with tears and – you know, because he was just making the decision he was going to put American sons and daughters in harm's way. Do you remember it that way?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I certainly remember the meeting and I remember the president asking an additional question, and that was: can we win? He certainly asked were they ready. He certainly asked whether they had everything they needed, and in addition he said can we prevail – can we – will the United States and the coalition be successful in this? And every single one of them answered affirmatively to each of the questions.

I do remember the president saluting and I do remember him getting up. I do not remember the emotional part of it, but it would not be surprising that a person of his compassion and concern would recognize the significance of his decision. He's a very caring person.

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