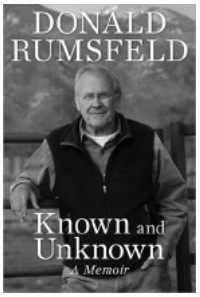
Book Reviews



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Known and Unknown: A Memoir

by Donald Rumsfeld

Reviewed by Colonel Lloyd J. Matthews, USA, Retired, former editor of *Parameters*, US Army War College Quarterly

From time immemorial, soldiers, politicians, office-holders, and other functionaries who ended their careers under a cloud of public opprobrium have seen fit on leaving office to write an "apologia"—not to be confused with "apology," an expression of regret over admitted failure. An apologia rather is a defense, usually based on detailed explanation, evidence, and argument, of the author's beclouded career. Perhaps the most famous instance was English Cardinal John Henry Newman's *Apologia pro Vita sua* (1864), which attempted to vindicate his conversion late in life from the Church of England to Roman Catholicism and which is now recalled as one of the greatest prose masterpieces in the English language. Certainly no stigma attaches to writing an apologia. Any public person whose actions and character have been broadly impugned deserves the right to make a considered public reply.

An instance of such a reply inviting comparison with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's *Known and Unknown* is former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's *In Retrospect* (1995), in which he owned up to his failure to divulge his growing reservations concerning the Vietnam war to President Lyndon Johnson. Though McNamara's book is nominally an apology, it is clear that he was still nursing wounds from the savaging he endured at the hands of Vietnam war critics and was hoping to rehabilitate his place in history by portraying his war decisions in a more nuanced and sympathetic light. Ironically, the appearance of his book some 30 years after the events served little more than to awaken and re-vocalize his critics. I mention his book to illustrate that authors can and do mix artful apology into their apologia as a deliberate rhetorical technique. By admitting to venial mistakes, they hope to gain credibility later in defending their whoppers.

In Rumsfeld's apologia for his stewardship of the Pentagon during the first six years of the George W. Bush administration, he elevates the device of the self-serving admission of minor error into a high art form. One example of many: "I soon learned that my 'old Europe' comment had touched a raw nerve. It caused an uproar, especially from those who felt they were on the receiving end of my remark. The French Finance Minister called the comment 'deeply irritating.' Ironically, my comment was unintentional. I had meant to say France and Germany represented 'old NATO,' not 'old Europe.'"

The title page of Rumsfeld's lengthy apologia (16 pages of front matter plus 815 pages of text and back matter) contains no mention of coauthors or a ghost writer. On the reverse, the publisher Penguin (Sentinel is part of the Penguin Group) states that "the story, the experiences, and the words are the author's alone." On page xv, Rumsfeld speaks of the novel experience of writing a book: "I had never tried to do so before." However, tucked away on pages 727 through 730 are acknowledgements containing by my count 130 named individuals excluding family, plus several library, archival, and institutional staffs. It becomes immediately clear on reading Rumsfeld's description of the book's production ("four years in the making") that it is in fact a massive collaborative artifact put together by a high-powered team of writers, editors, researchers, fact-checkers, consultants, and advisors under Rumsfeld's direction. The team invites comparison to military staff, as well it might: "The core group was headed by Keith Urbahn, my chief of staff and a Navy reserve intelligence officer, who has taken on historical, creative, and managerial responsibilities well beyond his years. . . ." As a longtime observer of the writing and production of books, I was astonished that Mr. Rumsfeld, having left office and no longer enjoying official entree to Department of Defense resources, was able to mobilize such a huge administrative, logistical, and creative effort. A clue resides in a note appearing in *Army Times*: "Rumsfeld received 'big bids' for his book, according to a publishing official who asked not to be identified, but decided to accept no advance for his book, only money for expenses. Any profit [after expenses] will be donated to a foundation he established recently to fund such projects as grants for 'promising young individuals' interested in public service" (28 April 2008, pp. 4-5).

Rumsfeld's story actually covers his entire 50-plus-year professional career, an illustrious career by any standard, but most readers, including this reviewer, will focus on his second stint as Secretary of Defense, lasting from 20 January 2001 to 15 December 2006, under President George W. Bush. This period embraced both the Afghanistan war (Operation Enduring Freedom) commencing 7 October 2001, and the second Iraq war (Operation Iraqi Freedom) commencing 19 March 2003. The book has a big woolly thesis, roughly compressible as follows: Operation Iraqi Freedom, launched by President George W. Bush on 20 March 2003, to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and destroy his supposed weapons of mass destruction (WMD), was justified, even if no WMD were found; moreover, the Department of Defense's planning for and execution of the war had been generally sound, despite the war's unexpected prolongation and despite serious blunders by the Department of State, Coalition Provisional Authority, intelligence community, news media, National Security Council, Congress, and even the President. In purely formal terms, that is, as a display of argumentative adeptness, Mr. Rumsfeld's defense of this thesis is extremely impressive. The case is meticulously conceived, exhaustively executed, massively documented (Rumsfeld appears never to have discarded a written thought or utterance), and, above all, shrewdly anticipative in foreseeing objections by gainsayers and then preempting them.

Unsympathetic readers who hope to find new verbal tokens of such disagreeable and widely alleged Rumsfeldian personality traits as arrogance, abrasiveness, raw egotism, and cocksureness, may be disappointed. The Rumsfeld persona appearing here has undergone an extreme makeover: generally, he is sunny, understanding, forbearing, receptive to subordinates' bad news and disagreements, and generally sparing of others' feelings—though he pulls few punches in expressing disappointment with Condoleeza Rice, L. Paul Bremer, Colin Powell, and George Tenet. Moreover, on big policy issues, many readers will believe Rumsfeld was substantially correct on most of them (for example, on our detainee program at Guantanamo, which despite unprecedented criticism has now been essentially adopted by the next administration).

But regardless of whether one agrees with the thrust of the book or believes it was successful in its purpose, it seems undeniable that it makes an essential contribution to the chronicle of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. US defense policy in those nations since the terrorist attacks on American soil on 11 September 2001, has been subject to unrelenting criticism in the nation's press, popular commentary, and contemporary histories—e.g., George Packer, *The Assassin's Gate* (2005); Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco* (2006); Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (2006) and *The War Within* (2008); Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II* (2006); Charles Ferguson, *No End in Sight* (2008); and especially Bradley Graham, *By His Own Rules: The Ambitions, Successes, and Ultimate Failures of Donald Rumsfeld* (2009). This onslaught has not been successfully counterbalanced by President George W. Bush's own memoir *Decision Points* (2010); Douglas Feith's memoir *War and Decision* (2008); or L. Paul Bremer's mixed and narrowly focused *My Year in Iraq* (2005). Certainly future historians, if not today's, need to hear the best case each side has to offer, and Rumsfeld's is far and away the most cogent defense of US policy—and of himself as a major architect of that policy—that we are likely to get.

Let us now return to the subject of Mr. Rumsfeld's "whoppers" alluded to earlier, that is, instances in which he steadfastly refused to admit big mistakes. Two examples. The first is a leadership issue, namely, his shoddy treatment of General Eric Shinseki, the Army's Chief of Staff and an officer of impeccable character who had his lower leg blown off in Vietnam but continued to serve, and who today in retirement leads the Veterans Administration. General Shinseki ran seriously afoul of the Secretary during the latter part of his tenure as Chief of Staff. A prime instance was his refusal to support cancellation of the Crusader artillery system in the spring 2002 Pentagon review process culminating in Mr. Rumsfeld's cancellation decision announced finally on 8 May. It so happened that during this contentious period, April 2002, well over a year prior to Genearl Shinseki's scheduled retirement in June 2003, word surfaced in the Pentagon that Shinseki's replacement, when the time came, would be his deputy General Jack Keane (who later declined). Since in the Pentagon bureaucracy power tends to shift rather rapidly from the incumbent to the named successor, the effect was to lame duck, and thus to rebuke and humiliate, the sitting chief. Rumsfeld was roundly attacked in the press for what was apparently a

maliciously retaliatory stroke against General Shinseki, and in the present book he takes the witness stand to defend himself (pp. 452-56, 650-54). It is a long, complicated, and even convoluted defense in which he disclaims any intention of lame ducking Shinseki (he does not broach that word). In denying that he was the leaker or arranged the leak, he begs the issue entirely. Why would he even be discussing a successor with Pentagon principals 14 to 15 months before the event? Moreover, from all he says, it is impossible to establish a precise timeline for events, and, most telling, he carefully avoids spelling out the unprecedented long lapse of time between his discussion of a successor and the actual date of Shinseki's scheduled retirement. After poring over his explanation several times and consulting other sources (Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 69; Robert Novak, *Washington Post*, 1 May 2003; Frank Tiboni, *Army Times*, 12 June 2003; and Richard Kohn, *Armed Forces Journal*, June 2006), this reviewer concludes that Mr. Rumsfeld's lengthy protest is disingenuous.

The second whopper is a policy issue. Philosophically speaking, Mr. Rumsfeld was a ground-power minimalist and remained one to the day he departed his position. Early on, he had become enamored of "net-centric warfare," the theory being to integrate all actors within a common grid composed of communications, computers, sensors, and other inputs so as to universalize the flow of information. Information superiority, reinforced by technological superiority in weaponry, target acquisition, and delivery platforms, enables faster decision cycles, forestalls enemy reactions, creates more friendly options, and minimizes risks and casualties. Capitalizing on precision-guided munitions of devastating power and launched at safe standoff distances and altitudes, network-centric violence is visited upon the enemy from the hygienic confines of hermetically sealed cockpits and missile-launch control rooms. No more need for big numbers of expensive ground troops to bend the enemy to our will. No more discomfiting casualty figures assailing the eyes of voters with each evening's news telecast. After all those bloody wars since Homeric times, we had finally discovered a way to win them on the cheap! Or so one would believe from all the hype generated by DOD's Office of Force Transformation beginning in late 2001. Mr. Rumsfeld could never quite entertain the thought that net-centric warfare as fleshed out with its full armamentarium of gee-whiz stand-off weaponry was operationally and strategically impotent in a likely insurgency war where securing the population and providing fit governance were key.

The Weinberger/Powell doctrine had wisely counselled that no future US military intervention be undertaken without decisive force. Yet, Mr. Rumsfeld, casting aside such stodgy old thinking, arranged for Operation Iraqi Freedom to be conducted on a shoestring (even if we include the 4th Infantry Division, which was barred by Turkey from invading Iraq from its soil). We succeeded brilliantly in the initial assault against Saddam's frontline forces, but were never able to muster the sort of widespread, smothering troop presence that would have snuffed out all significant opposition from the start. Despite the Weinberger/Powell insistence on clear political objectives, Rumsfeld's priority

was to achieve a quick military victory and get out. He devoted little attention to such politico-strategic concerns as post-conflict consolidation and government reconstitution, which would require large numbers of troops on the ground. Mr. Rumsfeld never seemed willing to include in his definition of victory in war the coequally valid desideratum of an acceptable peace. He never seemed to grasp that war is always fought for political ends and that overriding efforts must therefore be devoted to assuring that the desired political ends materialize. This idea is as old as Clausewitz, of course, and we may note that since the inauguration of the most recent Clausewitzian renaissance by Michael Howard and Peter Paret in 1976, the nation's political and military leaders have been literally drenched in reminders of the great philosopher's enduring dictum. Yet, in an irony bordering on the surreal, we as a nation have continued to celebrate the heroics and drama of the battlefield while political rewards remain tantalizingly beyond reach. It is incredible that Mr. Rumsfeld and his coterie did not know this or chose to ignore it. Prior to the war the "Future of Iraq Project" was completed by the Department of State which presciently warned of the sectarian furies that would be unleashed with the Iraqi government's decapitation and the consequent requirement for the wherewithal to establish and maintain order, security, and a functioning government in the war's immediate aftermath. Rumsfeld was later criticized for ignoring this "plan."

In his book, Rumsfeld grows testy on the issue, defending himself as follows: "The notion that a few in the State Department may have alerted people to potential problems in postwar Iraq—even if quite helpfully—was not on its face a seminal achievement. I had listed problems that might arise in postwar Iraq in my 'Parade of Horribles' memo. That does not mean my memo was a plan or solution" (p. 486). By shifting the question to the definitional issue of whether the State document was a "plan," Mr. Rumsfeld ignores the essential point that he had been well warned about what would happen if we barged into Iraq lacking sufficient troops to establish and maintain order as a necessary prelude to establishing a viable government. In fact, growing exasperated over the drumbeat of such warning, Mr. Rumsfeld, according to retired Major General John Batiste, "at one point threatened to fire the next person who mentioned the need for a postwar plan in Iraq." As a result, we ad hoced it with what few troops we had and could scrounge, the insurgency grew and then snowballed, and we are still there eight years later. At each step of the way, his has been the reluctant, skeptical, or naysayer's voice against calls for troop increases, citing a general here or there in support, worrying about an overly large US "footprint," fretting over the undeniable stress on the force and families (all legitimate concerns but not valid reasons for accepting defeat), or assuring listeners that commanders had not asked for more troops (they knew what the answer would be).

A dynamic soon emerged, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which we with great fanfare cleared a city of al Qaeda, then departed and used the same troops to clear another city, only to see the first revert to al Qaeda's control once our troops pulled out. Senator John McCain accurately characterized

this pattern as "playing an endless game of whack-a-mole." We simply didn't have enough forces to clear, hold, pacify, and consolidate, nor were sufficient numbers of capable indigenous Iraqi police/soldiers available to take over cleared cities and protect the population once American troops pulled out to go whack the next mole. It is of course true that raising additional troops for an already stretched volunteer Army was no easy task, and it is understandable that Rumsfeld was reluctant to put the President on the spot by asking for more. But it was maddeningly perverse for him to pretend publicly that more troops were not needed or that, if they were, they could be squeezed out of headquarters and other nondeployed stateside administrative units by resorting to greater "efficiencies."

It is significant that the book's otherwise complete and detailed index contains no mention whatever of the celebrated 2007 surge—at least I couldn't find it—since the successful surge, requiring an additional 20,000 troops, spectacularly revealed the utter bankruptcy of Rumsfeld's "strategy" for winning the war on the cheap, including his pretense right up to the bitter end that additional troops would serve no useful purpose, even though control of the capital Baghdad, among other embarrassments, had been essentially ceded to thugs, death squads, sectarian militias, and the ever-present al Qaeda. Omission from the book index of this topic can be technically justified by the fact that Rumsfeld resigned on 6 November 2006 (the date of his letter of resignation but he did not actually leave the Department until 15 December), whereas the new military commander General David Petraeus was not nominated to implement the surge until 26 January 2007, over two months after Rumsfeld left office. But Rumsfeld was privy to early discussions of the surge in November and indeed treats the subject in some depth (pp. 713-17) in his final chapter. Thus, the omission of the topic from the index will raise eyebrows, particularly since the rest of the chapter is indexed.

His remarks on the surge are lukewarm at best and misleading at worst, couched in terms suggesting he was won to the idea only as the objective conditions favoring it gradually became propitious. First, in November 2006: "Since a surge of military forces still lacked support among military leaders, that suggestion was placed in my memo [on options] 'below the line'—in other words, as a less favored option." Subsequently, after President Bush had firmly demanded of his advisors a plan for winning the war, not for pulling up stakes, and had approved General Petraeus's request for 20,000 more troops which began deploying in January 2007: "Though I was a latecomer in supporting the surge, by the time I left the Pentagon I felt there were solid arguments for its two main military features: a somewhat heavier US footprint [he can't bring himself to say "more troops"] and a new operational approach that centered on securing the population" [he fails to mention that it took four years for him to admit the virtue of this approach]. At the time of his departure from the Pentagon, he was asked by a television reporter what he thought of the plan to send additional soldiers to Iraq. His reply: "Well, one first has to inquire what they'll be used for," or words to that effect. During the Fox Evening News on 23 November

2008, the crawler reported Rumsfeld's statement that the 2007 surge in Iraq worked because, under him, all the groundwork had been laid, e.g., the Sunni Awakening, etc., but that the surge would not have worked earlier.

As it related to Mr. Rumsfeld's effort to salvage his reputation, it was unfortunate for him that the President selected Robert Gates to succeed him. Their juxtaposition in office invited attention to their contrasting managerial styles, and the contrast was not flattering to Mr. Rumsfeld. Mr. Gates soon showed himself to be as smart and tough as his predecessor, while his modesty, calm demeanor, and quiet confidence reassured a doubtful public and garnered a welcome measure of bipartisan support.

Rumsfeld was a latecomer in supporting the surge.

As noted, Mr. Rumsfeld confessed to many niggling missteps during his second tour at the Pentagon, but to this reviewer the book disappoints because he never stepped up to the plate and confessed to the biggest missteps of all—failure to act on the elementary principle that before undertaking to decapitate a government, one must be prepared to recapitate it; and, relatedly, failure to acknowledge the troop-intensive nature of the resulting counterinsurgency war in a sect- and tribal-riven failed state. Had he recognized these requirements, and employed his vast energy and talents to meet them, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars may well have been shortened, with far fewer American casualties.

At General Shinseki's retirement ceremony, to which Mr. Rumsfeld was not invited, the general warned his civilian masters against "trying to execute a twelve-division strategy with a ten-division Army." This must have stung the Secretary when he read the press reports, not only because it was so epigrammatically pointed but also because it was so devastatingly accurate.

Though the apologia *Known and Unknown* is indeed a prodigious monument to human vanity, it remains an adroit case on behalf of the Pentagon imperium of Donald Rumsfeld, a Secretary of Defense who, though not quite larger than life, came about as close as life itself is likely to permit. The book is a major contribution to the historiography professionals who aim to stay abreast of the defense world at the top and they should definitely take a spin through this provocative work.