

Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power

Dale R. Herspring

Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 2008, 247 pp.

Donald Rumsfeld will go down in history as one of the worst secretaries of defense since the end of World War II. This is the conclusion reached by Dale Herspring, a political science professor at the University of Kansas, in a new book transparently titled *Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power*. Without much effort to give the former secretary any benefit of the doubt, Herspring blames him directly for causing our military to become “demoralized” and “broken.”

Herspring lays out a damning indictment of Rumsfeld's errors. He greatly harmed civil-military relations by treating our senior military

officers with disrespect, by not listening to their advice, and by interfering with the traditional merit-based promotion system in order to surround himself with malleable uniformed officers while pushing out those with strong personalities like former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric K. Shinseki. He forced the military to radically adapt to his military transformation agenda with its reliance on high-tech weapon systems at the expense of cuts in personnel, and he involved himself directly in influencing the conduct of the war in Iraq in order to prove his transformational theories—with disastrous results for that mission and consequently for our national security. As if turning military structure, tactics, operations, and weapon systems upside down were not enough, Herspring adds, Rumsfeld and his supporters successfully lobbied the administration and manipulated data to send the American armed forces off to fight a war that many generals considered unnecessary. This list of complaints represents more or less the conventional wisdom in Washington in the aftermath of Rumsfeld's troubled tenure at the Pentagon, and there is surely a lot of truth in these accusations. However, Herspring ultimately appears so willing to vilify Rumsfeld that he misses some important nuances of the two issues addressed at length in this book: military transformation and the mismanagement of the Iraq war.

It is fashionable nowadays, and largely accurate, to criticize the Rumsfeld Pentagon for its alleged infatuation with advanced technologies and futuristic weapon systems at the expense of preparing for the kinds of low-tech insurgencies faced in Afghanistan and Iraq. Herspring draws extensively on the excellent work of critics of the military transformation process, such as Col. H. R. McMaster and Frederick W. Kagan, in arguing that the heavy reliance on the technological advances made possible by the information revolution has led to a profound misunderstanding of the “political, ethnic, economic, and religious aspects of war.” However, he is wrong in blaming solely the civilian leadership of the Department of Defense for being too technophile: the military leaders of at least the past couple of decades have by and large favored the same narrow techno-centric approach to the study of warfare, as Kagan eloquently argues in *Finding The Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy*. Herspring's own hero and the person to whom this book is dedicated, General Shinseki, is quoted in the book as stating, in 1999, that “we intend to transform the Army, all its components, into a

standard design with internetted C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) packages that allow us to put a combat-capable brigade anywhere in the world in 96 hours.” However, this desire to create lighter and more mobile brigades in order to achieve higher operational speed is the same thing that animated Rumsfeld and the proponents of “network-centric warfare” sharply criticized by Herspring only a few pages earlier. It is far too simplistic to imply, as the author does, that Shinseki’s vision of future conflict was the correct one and that it was rejected by Rumsfeld due to the latter’s preference for high-tech weapons. In truth, Rumsfeld’s most cherished ideas about defense transformation really had more to do with investing in missile defense and space-based systems than in the intricacies of land warfare. In short, the U.S. military’s inadequate force structure and doctrine in approaching the Iraq war should not be blamed solely, or even primarily, on Rumsfeld’s push for transformation. The strong preference for preparing for short, conventional (i.e., force-on-force combat), high-tech wars has been shared by most civilian and military leaders throughout 1990s—the period when talk of the Revolution in Military Affairs was the *fad-du-jour* inside the defense establishment. After all, the so-called “godfather” of defense transformation, Vice-Admiral Arthur K. Cebrowski, has been one of the most influential figures in U.S. military thinking for the entire decade preceding his appointment as Rumsfeld’s director of the Office of Force Transformation.

To be sure, the former secretary of defense made his share of grave mistakes when it comes to the invasion of Iraq. And this book does a much better job in its critique of the secretary’s performance on this issue. Making extensive use of the journalistic reports of Bob Woodward, Thomas Ricks, and Michael Gordon, Herspring substantiates his critique of Rumsfeld without adding much original data. He is most persuasive in pointing out the deleterious effects of the former secretary’s micromanagement of operational and tactical issues such as limiting the number of troops or altering the TPFDDs (time-phased force and deployment data) in the wake of the Iraq war—decisions which normally are the prerogatives of military rather than of civilian leaders. Interference in such matters rightly earned Rumsfeld his reputation for arrogance, and his many critics in and out of uniform are more than justified in deploring such conduct—

especially during wartime, when such decisions can literally affect matters of life and death.

Of similar gravity is Rumsfeld's complete lack of serious concern for post-war planning. Herspring is devastating in exposing the crass incompetence of the secretary and his staff in dealing with post-conflict operations. Former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith comes in for particular criticism on this point and is the only person to come out in this book worse than Rumsfeld. Among the multitude of unfortunate decisions on this matter detailed in Herspring's book, one could note Office of the Secretary of Defense's willful disregard of the State Department-sponsored Future of Iraq project, its opposition to an Army plan to have a three-star general in charge of post-combat operations, and maybe most tragically the lack of any sort of real-world politico-military operational plan for stabilizing Iraq in the wake of Saddam's fall. Just one month before the invasion, Feith, the person Rumsfeld put in charge of the post-combat operations, "assured" the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "when we talk about all of the key functions that are going to need to be performed in post-war Iraq, we have thought about them across the range from worst case to very good case." Statements such as these make it especially difficult to disagree with the central theme of this book—the "arrogance of power" that characterized Rumsfeld and his acolytes.

Having said all this, it is also worth noting two important caveats. First, even with a much more professional national security team in place, the task of rebuilding Iraq into a peaceful democratic state was an exceedingly difficult one whose chances of success at a reasonable price were fairly modest to begin with. And second, to the extent that many of the problems of the invasion have their origins in a flawed understanding of the nature of modern warfare influenced by an infatuation with technology, it is far from clear how much of the blame should go to Rumsfeld versus the top military commander, U.S. Army General Tommy Franks. Herspring describes Franks as a sort of victim of Rumsfeld's overpowering demeanor. Rumsfeld allegedly "tamed" Franks and "isolated" him from the rest of the military, thus assuring that the war will be fought according to the secretary's "transformational" approach. However, this narrative is rather questionable if one considers the general's own recollection of events in his memoir, *American Soldier*. Franks appeared just as

enthused with the opportunities of network-centric warfare as Rumsfeld, and at least as likely to dismiss the advice of the more cautious older military officers as that of people from a bygone era who don't understand the impact of the digital revolution on the modern battlefield. It is not at all improbable that the Iraq war would have been fought in roughly the same manner even if Franks had a far less interfering boss than Don Rumsfeld.

Professor Herspring's previous book, *The Pentagon and the Presidency*, is a well-regarded history of American civil-military relations. Despite some pointed observations on Rumsfeld's errors during his second tenure at the Pentagon, this book is overall a poor companion to its predecessor—mainly due to its passionate anti-Rumsfeld bias. This is unfortunate, as civil-military relations in his tenure have clearly been in great turmoil. Both civilian and military leaders would surely benefit from an extensive and objective study of these tumultuous times, one which could provide some valuable “lessons learned” for them and their successors. Properly understood, the nature of modern warfare, as witnessed in Iraq and Afghanistan, requires a symbiotic relation between the military and the political instruments of national power—and effective civil-military cooperation is at the crux of achieving that. The timing could not have been better for providing scholars and practitioners with a careful study of the errors of recent past. It is a shame Herspring's effort falls short of that worthy goal.

Ionut Popescu
Duke University