

WAR STORIES

Rumsfeld's Pentagon Papers

His leaked memo is the most astonishing document of this war so far.

By Fred Kaplan

Donald Rumsfeld's war-on-terror memo—which was leaked to *USA Today* on Wednesday and picked up by the rest of the media, for the most part with a shrug, on Thursday—may be the most important, even stunning official document yet to come out of this war.

It puts the lie to the Bush administration's PR campaign that postwar Iraq is progressing nicely and that the media are exaggerating the setbacks. (If the media are exaggerating, this memo indicates, then so, too, is Secretary Rumsfeld.) It reads eerily like some internal mid-'60s document from *The Pentagon Papers* that spelled out how badly things were going in Vietnam (just as President Lyndon B. Johnson and his defense secretary, Robert McNamara, were publicly proclaiming tunnel light and victories). To use a phrase coined during LBJ's tenure to describe the ever-widening fissure between rhetoric and reality, Rumsfeld's memo marks the first unconcealable eruption of a "credibility gap" in the wartime presidency of George W. Bush.

The two-page memo, dated Oct. 16, was addressed to Rumsfeld's top aides: the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers; the vice chairman, Gen. Pete Pace; Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz; and Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith. Here are some key passages:

- "It is pretty clear that the coalition can win in Afghanistan and Iraq in one way or another, but it will be a long, hard slog."
- "My impression is that we have not yet made truly bold moves [in the war on terrorism]."
- "We are having mixed results with [tracking down] Al-Qaida. . . . With respect to the Ansar Al-Islam, we are just getting started."
- "It is not possible to change DoD fast enough to successfully fight the global war on terror; an alternative might be to try to fashion a new institution either within DoD or elsewhere."
- "Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?"
- "Does the US need to fashion a broad, integrated plan to stop the next generation of terrorists? The US is putting relatively little effort into a long-range plan, but we are putting a great deal of effort into trying to stop terrorists. The cost-benefit ratio is against us! Our cost is billions against the terrorists' costs of millions."
- "How do we stop those who are financing the radical madrassa schools? Is our current situation such that 'the harder we work, the behinder we get'? ... Should we create a private foundation to entice radical madrassas to a more moderate course?"

Another question might be added to this list: Have you ever read a more pathetic federal document in your life? What is being stated here can be summed up as follows: We'll probably win the battle for Afghanistan and Iraq (or, more precisely, it's "pretty clear" we "can win" it, "in one way or another" after "a long, hard slog"), but we're losing the struggle for hearts and minds in the broader war against terrorism. Not only that, we don't know how to measure winning or losing, we don't have a plan for winning it, we don't know how to fashion a plan, and the bureaucratic agencies put in charge of waging this war and drawing up these plans may be inherently incapable of doing so.

White House press secretary Scott McClellan, when asked Wednesday about the leaked memo, tried to put the best spin on it, extolling the quality of questions that Rumsfeld had posed in the memo. "That's exactly what a strong and capable secretary of defense like Secretary Rumsfeld should be doing," McClellan said with a remarkably straight face.

Maybe so, but it's a shame Rumsfeld and his crew—who, after all, have been running this operation—weren't asking such questions two years ago or five months ago or, for that matter, five weeks ago. His questions about the *madrassahs*—the schools where fundamentalist clerics indoctrinate the next generation of Muslims in anti-Western militancy—are truly cogent. But he seems unaware that his current style of neutralizing these institutions may be heightening their appeal in the region's most susceptible quarters. What to do about this cultural dimension of the war is a genuine dilemma, perhaps the crucial dilemma of our time. But Rumsfeld's bull-session recipes—creating a private foundation to entice moderation, drafting a "new finding" for the CIA (which means what—an executive order that broadens the scope of permissible assassinations?)—are thin brews.

What makes the Rumsfeld memo a major document, however, is that it confirms much of the news reporting coming out of Iraq—the same reporting that Bush officials (including Rumsfeld) have publicly derided as biased. NPR's Deborah Amos reported Wednesday morning that Donald Evans, Bush's secretary of commerce, came to Baghdad recently and admonished the American reporters there to start paying more attention to the good news about the occupation. "The American people have a far different view from the reality that we all know is here," Amos quoted Evans as saying, "You should report what we're really seeing." How long had Evans been in Iraq? About 24 hours. Where did he sleep that night? In Kuwait.

Rumsfeld's memo makes plain that our top officials suffer no illusions about the war. They are trying only to sell illusions to the rest of us. The leaking of Rumsfeld's memo puts a tailspin on the sales pitch.