

# The Brass on Iraq

By Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | November 7, 2006

When the news broke on November 4 that the lead editorial in the Gannet-owned *Army Times* newspaper group had called for Donald Rumsfeld's resignation, the cable news organizations portrayed the announcement as if it were a blow like no other.

Actually, this was the second time the *Times* group—which includes the *Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force Times*—had called for Rumsfeld's resignation. But, with the mid-term elections on Tuesday and the obviously deteriorating situation in Iraq, this latest call appeared to be politically motivated. Robert Hodierno, the managing editor of the *Times* group, denied the charge. According to Hodierno, President Bush's stated intention to retain the defense secretary for the next two years prompted the decision to protest Rumsfeld's continued tenure.

Significantly, this editorial comes from a news group that focuses entirely on the military. Its reporters cover virtually every military installation and defense industry outside the "black" or covert budget. The *Army Times* is sold in every military base and post exchange and is available in many military commissaries. It is read by personnel on active duty as well as by the National Guard and reserve components. For these reasons, the story made a splash over the weekend.

## Finding Fault

But the editorial did not, in my view, go far enough in its pinning full responsibility on Rumsfeld for the debacle in Iraq. Without question, he bears much responsibility. But as president, George Bush is ultimately responsible for whatever occurs or does not occur on his watch.

Moreover, the generals prosecuting the war are also responsible for the advice they have given to the civilians in the Pentagon and the White House.

For example, the editorial notes that, despite the "best efforts of trainers," the Iraqis are still not able to operate on their own. But for many months after Bush declared "mission accomplished," there were no U.S. trainers or a coherent training program in Iraq. Moreover, some U.S.

personnel subsequently sent as trainers lacked the extensive background needed to be effective.

The editorial points out that troops consistently reported that Iraqi recruits had no sense of national identity, that all they wanted was a paycheck. Responsibility for destroying any vestige of the organizational structures or symbols around which the Iraqi people could rally lies squarely at the feet of Paul Bremer and the narrow circle of neocons that occupied Rumsfeld's Pentagon.

Perhaps more damningly, the *Army Times* editorial says that "colonels and generals ... asked their bosses for more troops" and the "service chiefs ... asked for more money."

But if the *Times* editorial is correct about the request for more troops, then someone in the chain of command is not telling the truth. There is, in other words, a weak link somewhere in the chain that runs from colonels (brigade and regimental commanders) and two-star generals (division commanders) to the three-star commander of U.S. forces in Iraq to General Casey as commander of all coalition forces in Iraq to General Abeyzaid as head of Central Command to Rumsfeld and then Bush.

## Repairing the Damage

In a democracy, such failures should lead to two immediate actions.

First, Congress must exercise its constitutional oversight responsibilities, which it has so spectacularly and so often failed to do in the Iraqi misadventure. Congress has not held probing hearings to find out who is short-circuiting the requests for more troops and money. It has failed to consider what, if any, institutional or bureaucratic remedies are possible. And, because the lessons that should have emerged from such a thoroughgoing investigation do not see the light of day, the United States will be less able

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to overcome the inevitable propensity to fight—and lose—the next war. As such, Congress is completely complicit in the failure of the administration and in the deaths of those it sends to fight.

Second, the Joint Chiefs of Staff should take the one step that could have attenuated if not ended this Iraq misadventure: denounce the war publicly and then immediately hand in their resignations. The *Times* editorial, surprisingly, doesn't connect these dots.

According to Mark Perry, who has written a detailed account of the early years of the Joint Chiefs as an institution, U.S. generals and admirals have long been uncomfortable with backing a foreign and defense policy not of their own at least partial formulation. This issue first surfaced publicly in 1949 during Truman's presidency. But this so-called "revolt of the admirals" was not clear-cut, for the policy dimension was masked as inter-service rivalry between the Air Force and Navy aviation over control of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. (The Air Force, with a unified position and better public relations, won.)

The issue resurfaced again during the Vietnam War, and this time policy, not rivalry, was the issue. In 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was lobbying for continued massive increases in U.S. ground forces in South Vietnam, whereas all of the chiefs believed that no amount of U.S. forces could win the unwinnable. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle Wheeler, proposed to the other chiefs that they resign *en masse* to protest the "immoral" policy that would doom thousands more U.S. soldiers. Wheeler and the chiefs saw

McNamara's testimony as "a rupture of the unofficial contract between our democracy's civil and military powers, whereby the military pledges to obey the civil authorities without question but in return the civilian leaders implicitly pledge that their policies will not cause needless loss of life." Ultimately, however, Wheeler reversed course and decided to work from within to change policy rather than in effect "mutiny" and leave the forces leaderless.

Ever since, whenever a similar dispute over policy has come up, the argument of "staying in and working to change policy" has prevailed. But between Vietnam and the present Iraq War, U.S. military forces have not been in prolonged combat. Today we have reached a tipping point in Iraq. In an interview last week, Vice President Cheney said that administration policy in Iraq and on the war on terror would not change regardless of who wins the midterm elections. This, in a democracy?

Whether the *Times* editorial will be only a symbolic gesture or exert some influence on Tuesday's ballot remains to be seen. Its effect will be muted by the fact that most military members assigned out of state or overseas will have voted already via absentee ballots.

Which leaves the civilians, 61% of whom disapprove of the war, to make their voices heard, and the five chiefs, if they have the courage.

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