

P A R T O N E

THE STUFF OF RUMSFELD



IN APRIL OF 2003, SADDAM was gone. The Iraqi people had gotten what the Bush administration had claimed was their due—freedom from a tyrant, Saddam Hussein. The government of the United States promised the world that the real search for the much-hyped and much-feared weapons of mass destruction could begin, now that the United Nations weapons inspectors were gone.¹ And for a period of a few days or weeks, there was tentative hope. Maybe the bombing was over; maybe the loss of life would be minimal. Maybe the people of Iraq would embrace the U.S. as liberators. Maybe history was wrong about occupying forces, and some grand mix of American ingenuity and compassion would annihilate the pervading pessimism felt by those of us who had opposed this invasion.

Something very different was observed. The early signs were that Iraq was in a state of something far beyond what we think of as freedom—there was utter chaos. Looting was

rampant. Famously, the National Museum of Iraq was looted, but the raiding of hospitals and even people's homes made the situation intolerable. With no space in the morgue, children who had died in the invasion were buried in the back yard of the Saddam Hospital for Children, and the Red Cross reported that just three hospitals of the thirty-two in Baghdad were open, and those were not fully operational.²

Reports of the horror came frequently and brutally. Bodies stacked in piles. Iraqis needing emergency care were left unattended due to lack of electricity and clean water. There were car-jackings, bombings, and kidnappings. For me, though, I was haunted by one BBC interview I heard with a British woman who had lived in Iraq for more than 20 years, and who had spent the days since the fall of the old regime sequestered inside, fearing that if she ventured out she would come back to find her home ransacked. She was asked about life under Saddam and responded that she never had paid attention to politics, but there was one restriction the Iraqi government had tried to impose: it had tried to force her to become an Iraqi citizen as a requirement for continued residency, but the World Court ruled against this overreaching of government authority, and that was the end of that. The reporter then asked her if she was not relieved to have freedom from the oppressive Baathist government of Saddam. With Iraq in anarchy, her response said it all: "What freedom?"

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had an answer for her. In the midst of these days, he delivered one of his most memorable quotes: "Freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things," the secretary said. "They're also free to live their lives

and do wonderful things. And that's what's going to happen here."³ It was the first half of the quote that drew attention, the part that forced us to consider freedom and chaos as somehow inextricably bound together.

As an addendum to his statement, Rumsfeld came as close to shrugging his shoulders in language as I believe anyone can. "Stuff happens," he said. Freedom, criminal activity, wonderful things—Stuff Happens.

Many months later, in late October of 2004, with the U.S. military operations mired in Iraq due to a well-organized and well-armed resistance to occupation, the looting story resurfaced. A large stash of explosives—380 tons of RDX, enough, apparently, to bring down more than 700,000 planes in the manner of the Lockerbie, Scotland, terrorist bombing—was looted from a site at Al Qaqaa when Baghdad fell.

Since United Nations weapons inspectors had kept the site secure for more than a decade prior to the invasion, questions about Rumsfeld's plan for post-war occupation were revisited. Before the war, Rumsfeld had severely criticized Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki, who was removed from his position after publicly saying the post-war occupation of Iraq would require several hundred thousand troops, instead of the 100,000 Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz claimed were necessary. Rumsfeld made it very clear: "The idea that it would take several hundred thousand U.S. forces," he said in February of 2003, "I think is far off the mark." Clearly, though, the light force used to take Iraq has been overstretched when it has come to keeping Iraq secure.



Rumsfeld's late-in-life celebrity status—achieved in part by the mystique of becoming U.S. Secretary of Defense for a second time in 2001, after a 24-year hiatus—came after a long period of building connections in Washington, D.C., in the public and private sectors. After graduating from Princeton in 1954, Rumsfeld served as a U.S. Navy pilot and flight instructor from 1954–1957. In fact, his four years of active duty and several years after that in the Reserve—having retired with a rank of Captain in 1989—give him almost unrivaled military experience in the high levels of the George W. Bush administration, an administration that has orchestrated two major military invasions and occupations in the area of the Middle East.

While in the Reserves, first in the Ready Reserve (until 1975), then in the Standby Reserve (until 1989), Rumsfeld pursued a career that mixed politics and executive experience in private corporations. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1962 and served until 1969, when he left Congress to join the Nixon administration as Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity and Assistant to the President until 1971, when he became Counselor to the President and Director of the Economic Stabilization Program. In 1973, as Watergate began to materialize as a bona fide scandal, he departed Washington to serve as U.S. ambassador to NATO in Brussels. Rumsfeld has been part of every Republican administration since. Some of the highlights include serving as the youngest Secretary of Defense for Gerald Ford from 1975–1977 and acting as Special Presidential Envoy to the Middle East for President Reagan from 1983–1984. It was in that capacity that he visited Iraq

in 1983 to let Saddam Hussein know that the U.S. was ready for friendly relations with Iraq, even though Saddam had been accused of using chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war raging at the time. A photo of Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hussein during that visit is ubiquitous; nearly every political web site has featured it at some time.

Since 1977, Rumsfeld has moved fairly freely between private industry and the White House. In that year he became Chief Executive Officer of G.D. Searle & Co., a pharmaceutical giant. He was credited with turning around the fortunes of that company, and he stayed with Searle until 1985, when he went into private business. In 1990 he became C.E.O. of General Instrument Corporation, and from 1993–2001, he was C.E.O. of Gilead Sciences, Inc., another pharmaceutical giant.

There are plenty of details that could be pored over here—but I have to confess that my first reaction, when I read such a biography, is to wonder how one man can accumulate so many important-sounding titles. 1983, for example, seems to have been an especially busy one for Rumsfeld. That was the year he served simultaneously as a Member of the President's General Advisory Committee on Arms Control, Special Presidential Envoy on the Law of the Sea Treaty, Senior Advisor to the President's Panel on Strategic Systems, Member of the U.S. Joint Advisory Commission on U.S.-Japan Relations, and Special Presidential Envoy to the Middle East, according to his official biography.⁴

One of the more curious aspects of Rumsfeld's biography is his extensive experience in the pharmaceutical industry. Why, you have to wonder, does the Secretary of Defense have so much background in pharmaceuticals? It's a question worth trying to answer (indeed, the Rumsfeld-pharmaceuti-

PART ONE

cals-chemical weapons connection has been investigated⁵), but the other logical question is, since he operated as C.E.O., how did he run those companies, and what is his executive style?

At Searle, Rumsfeld was credited with saving the company by decentralizing its headquarters and selling off poorly performing divisions. It is also interesting that Searle, before hiring Rumsfeld, was having difficulty getting federal approval to market aspartame, a sweetener the Food and Drug Administration would not approve because of its link to brain tumors in laboratory rats. Rumsfeld, according to Patty Wood-Allott, a former Searle sales representative, promised to “call in his markers” to get FDA approval for aspartame. Presumably, Rumsfeld would call upon his connections in Washington to help Searle land FDA approval. In 1981—with Rumsfeld in the middle of his tenure as head of Searle and the newly-elected President Reagan— aspartame was approved by FDA Commissioner Arthur Hill Hayes.⁶ To this day, allegations of the dangers of aspartame swirl (specifically, it is thought that aspartame might be toxic because the body converts one of its ingredients, methanol, into formaldehyde), though the majority of scientists regard it as safe. Certainly, there has been no aspartame-related public health crisis in the 24 years since its approval, but the circumstances of its approval—and Rumsfeld’s apparent influence—give a glimpse into the intermingling of scientific research, government bureaucracy, and corporate influence that we have come to associate with Donald Rumsfeld and the George W. Bush administration in general. Aspartame languishes for years after its discovery in 1955, Searle seeks FDA approval for it, Rumsfeld is hired as C.E.O., aspartame gets approved by the FDA. Stuff Happens.