

April 18th, 2006

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The Generals are Revolting

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Six retired generals have now called for the resignation of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on the grounds that... well, just what has the Secretary done, or not done, that justifies his removal from the Pentagon in the middle of a war?

Read through all the generals' statements, or listen to them on television, and it's impossible to get straight precisely what it is these generals are squawking about. One minute they're talking about our strategy in Iraq, and then they're blathering on about the Secretary's plans for re-structuring our military forces or about Donald Rumsfeld's hard-driving, aggressive management style. For example, Major General John Batiste says about the Secretary that

We need leadership up there that respects the military as they expect the military to respect them. And that leadership needs to understand teamwork.

The word "crisp" doesn't leap to mind, does it? And Major General Paul Eaton claims now that Secretary Rumsfeld

alienated his allies in our own military, ignoring the advice of seasoned officers.

This sounds serious, but surely General Eaton could have told us what advice these seasoned officers gave that was ignored. Was it about the war, or about force re-structuring – or about the design of new uniforms?

In all, the generals' comments are so muddled—so imprecise and unfocused—that it's tempting to dismiss these generals the way Groucho Marx, as the premier of Fredonia in *Duck Soup*, dismissed the peasants who had risen against him:

Guard: "Sire, the peasants are revolting."

Groucho: "They certainly are."

But our country is at war and our soldiers' lives are at stake, so it's worth some effort to try and untangle the lines, and to pin down just what it is the generals are trying to say:

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, some former military commanders, members of Congress and civilian analysts voiced concerns that President Bush wasn't committing enough troops to the looming fight. The only active-duty commander who seems to have publicly voiced this concern at the time was Army chief-of-staff General Eric Shinseki, who quickly found himself unwelcome at the Pentagon. (His successor was named unusually early, and it was made clear that Shinseki's term of office wouldn't be extended.) It was a shabby way to treat this honorable officer, and it may well have sent a message to other generals that public dissent wasn't appreciated by Secretary Rumsfeld – or by the President.

The “More Troops” Chorus Grew Louder

After Baghdad fell and it became obvious that stabilizing Iraq was going to be harder than the Administration had thought, the chorus of those calling for more troops on the ground grew louder. Both the President and Secretary Rumsfeld responded to this criticism by asserting – time and again – that it was our commanders on the ground who determined troop levels in Iraq, and that these commanders had never been overruled by the Pentagon or the White House.

To some of us who had either been in the military or had worked with the military, this seemed suspicious. Simply put, none of us had ever met a general who thought he had “enough” troops to accomplish whatever mission had been assigned to him. If our generals in Iraq were insisting that they had enough troops – when it appeared so obvious to so many of us that they didn't – either these generals were different from those we had known, or the President and Secretary Rumsfeld were being disingenuous.

One explanation bandied about – in emails, phone calls and over drinks – was that our commanders in Iraq were “bureaucrats in uniform” who knew that asking for more troops would end their careers. After all, look what had happened to Shinseki. So they didn't ask for more troops. This meant the President and Secretary Rumsfeld were – technically – telling the truth when they claimed that they had never rejected a commander's request for more boots on the ground.

Now, if any of these six retired generals is claiming that, in fact, he had requested more troops *and was turned down by the President or the Secretary of Defense* – then this really is big news. It would mean that President Bush and Secretary Rumsfeld have been lying. This would lead not merely to Secretary Rumsfeld's resignation – but to the President's impeachment. As best I can tell, however, none of the six has explicitly made this claim.

Moreover, none of these six retired generals either held the top slot in Iraq since the invasion or has served as the Army's or Marine Corps' chief-of-staff. This means that all of them reported during wartime not to the President, or even the Secretary of Defense, but to more senior officers. Again, the same question pops up: Are these six retired generals now asserting that while on active duty in Iraq they had asked their superior officers for more troops, and their requests were denied? If so, then it's the more senior officers above them – this would include Generals Richard Myers, who served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Tommy Franks, who planned and executed the Iraq invasion— who've been lying to us, or at least misleading us. That's because Myers and Franks, like the President and Secretary Rumsfeld, have given us the impression that none of their senior subordinates has ever requested more troops and been denied them. And this, too, would be an explosive news

story.

The Reporters' Anti-War Agenda

It's disappointing – but not surprising – that the reporters to whom the six retired generals have been talking haven't troubled to get any of this straight. That's probably because these reporters – and their publications and networks – oppose the war, and so are quite happy to publish or broadcast any criticism of the Defense Secretary that comes their way without asking the kinds of probing questions that just might turn the criticism into a non-story.

But surely someone in Washington – in the press or in Congress – can get cracking and ask the questions that will tell us what, precisely, these generals are trying to say. Are they calling the Defense Secretary and the President liars? If they are, then why did they wait so long to speak out? And if this isn't what the generals are asserting – then what are they talking about? If they believe the current strategy in Iraq is doomed to failure – and there's a case to be made for this – let these generals tell us what we must do right now, before it's too late. Or, if what's driving them is a distaste for the Secretary's plans to re-structure our military forces – which quite a few senior officers oppose – that's an old story and isn't worth all the press coverage these generals and their statements have been given.

But if all this is really just an effort by a bunch of retired officers, with grudges to avenge and time on their hands, to get back at our Secretary of Defense for his brusque and sometimes abrasive manner of dealing with subordinates who are muddled, imprecise and unfocused when they speak – well, then these generals really are revolting.

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