

Donald H. Rumsfeld, Defense Secretary During Iraq War, Is Dead at 88

Mr. Rumsfeld, who served four presidents, oversaw a war that many said should never have been fought. But he said the removal of Saddam Hussein had “created a more stable and secure world.”

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Published June 30, 2021 Updated Aug. 24, 2021

Donald H. Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense for Presidents Gerald R. Ford and George W. Bush, who presided over America’s Cold War strategies in the 1970s and, in the new world of terrorism decades later, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, died on Tuesday at his home in Taos, N.M. He was 88.

The cause was multiple myeloma, said Keith Urbahn, a spokesman for the family.



Mr. Rumsfeld in 1970, when he ran the Office of Economic Opportunity, the federal antipoverty agency, under President Richard M. Nixon. George Tames/The New York Times

Encores are hardly rare in Washington, but Mr. Rumsfeld had the distinction of being the only defense chief to serve two nonconsecutive terms: 1975 to 1977 under President Ford, and 2001 to 2006 under President Bush. He was also the youngest, at 43, and the oldest, at 74, to hold the post — first in an era of Soviet-American nuclear perils, then in an age of subtler menace by terrorists and rogue states.

A staunch ally of former Vice President Dick Cheney, who had been his protégé and friend for years, Mr. Rumsfeld was a combative infighter who seemed to relish conflicts as he challenged cabinet rivals, members of Congress and military orthodoxies. And he was widely regarded in his second tour as the most powerful defense secretary since Robert S. McNamara during the Vietnam War.

Like his counterpart of long ago, Mr. Rumsfeld in Iraq waged a costly and divisive war that ultimately destroyed his political life and outlived his tenure by many years. But unlike McNamara, who offered mea culpas in a 2003 documentary, “The Fog of War,” Mr. Rumsfeld acknowledged no serious failings and warned in a farewell valedictory at the Pentagon that quitting Iraq would be a terrible mistake, even though the war, the country learned, had been based on a false premise — that Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader, had been harboring weapons of mass destruction.



Mr. Rumsfeld in 1975, when he was the White House chief of staff for President Gerald R. Ford. His deputy was Mr. Cheney, left. Harvey Georges/Associated Press

“A conclusion by our enemies that the United States lacks the will or the resolve to carry out our missions that demand sacrifice and demand patience is every bit as dangerous as an imbalance of conventional military power,” he said. “It may well be comforting to some to consider graceful exits from the agonies and, indeed, the ugliness of combat. But the enemy thinks differently.”

In his 2011 memoir, “Known and Unknown,” Mr. Rumsfeld, more than four years out of office, still expressed no regrets over the decision to invade Iraq, which had cost the United States \$700 billion and 4,400 American lives, insisting that the removal of President Hussein had justified the effort. “Ridding the region of Saddam’s brutal regime has created a more stable and secure world,” he wrote.

He sidestepped the issue of whether the Iraq war had diverted resources from the conflict in Afghanistan, leading to a Taliban resurgence there after the United States had invaded the country for harboring terrorists involved in the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. “It was precisely during the toughest period in the Iraq war that Afghanistan, with coalition help, took some of its most promising steps toward a free and better future,” he declared.

Positions of Power

Mr. Rumsfeld had been an athlete at Princeton and a Navy fighter pilot after the Korean War, and when he got to Washington in 1957 he seemed like an All-American who had stepped off the Wheaties box — a strikingly handsome Midwesterner radiating confidence, taking on big tasks and doing everything well. He worked for a couple of congressmen, then was elected to four terms in the House of Representatives himself.

He worked for four presidents in a succession of personal triumphs, migrating from Capitol Hill to the Nixon administration’s Office of Economic Opportunity, to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as ambassador, and into the Ford White House as chief of staff. Between Pentagon stints, he was President Ronald Reagan’s special envoy to the Middle East and made fortunes as an executive with pharmaceutical, electronics and biotechnology companies.



Mr. Rumsfeld, as the outgoing defense secretary, and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff met with President-elect Jimmy Carter in December 1976 at the Pentagon. Associated Press

As President Bush’s defense secretary, Mr. Rumsfeld had hoped to modernize an antiquated military establishment by cutting the bloated Pentagon bureaucracy, streamlining weapons systems, developing a missile defense shield and creating smaller, more mobile and lethal forces that could move swiftly around the globe to put down regional flare-ups in the new century.

But his innovative plans were all but forgotten on the morning of 9/11, when terrorists crashed hijacked jetliners into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and into the Pentagon, killing nearly 3,000 people. (A fourth plane went down in a field in Pennsylvania after passengers had tried to regain control.)

Mr. Rumsfeld was in his Pentagon office that day as the building shook and collapsed on one side. As 20,000 military and civilian employees were evacuated, he helped carry the wounded into ambulances. Through the day, as Mr. Bush was shuttled from a Florida school visit to secure locales in Louisiana and Nebraska and Mr. Cheney took charge at the White House, Mr. Rumsfeld, in a Pentagon bunker, conveyed orders to safeguard national leaders, activate defense measures across the country and place American forces on alert around the world.

That evening he held a televised news conference. “The United States government is functioning in the face of this terrible act,” Mr. Rumsfeld said, and he announced that the Pentagon would be open for business in the morning.

As Americans woke to a perilous new era, Mr. Bush declared war on terrorism, and Mr. Rumsfeld became chief executor of the strategic plans. In October, American forces invaded Afghanistan to suppress a fanatical Taliban regime that had sheltered terrorists and imposed a brutal theocracy on the Afghan people, and to hunt for Osama bin Laden, who had masterminded the Sept. 11 attacks.



Mr. Rumsfeld with President Bush on Sept. 12, 2001, the day after the Pentagon had been struck by a hijacked jetliner. Pablo Martinez Monsivais/Associated Press

And in 2003, with Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney insisting that President Hussein was allied with Al Qaeda, that he was harboring weapons of mass destruction and that he would soon threaten the world, Mr. Rumsfeld deployed forces in Iraq for a pre-emptive strike. Baghdad fell in three weeks, and Iraqi

military resistance quickly faded. But the short war gave way to a long struggle against internecine fighting and a resolute insurgency. Saddam Hussein was captured and executed, but no weapons of mass destruction were ever found.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, the defense secretary had argued for the minimal force levels needed to achieve victories, an idea codified as the Rumsfeld Doctrine. But critics said that he had no viable plan for the postwar era in either country, and that his determination to strike in Iraq with a light, fast force had crippled the military's postwar ability to restore order and contain the sectarian violence and a widening insurgency.

Mr. Rumsfeld contested that idea in his memoir. "Too many troops could hurt our ability to win Iraqi confidence," he wrote, "and it could translate into more casualties, because more troops would mean more targets for our enemies."

Coming Under Attack

Over the next three years, as casualties mounted and the American public grew restive, the sectarian violence brought Iraq to the brink of civil war. There was even talk of an unthinkable defeat for the Americans.

Mr. Rumsfeld, who briefed Mr. Bush daily and was his chief spokesman on the war, came to embody what critics called the administration's misjudgments and arrogance in a war gone wrong. He was accused of refusing to admit mistakes or change direction, of being slow to adopt counterinsurgency tactics, and of relying on a closed circle of hawkish advisers, including Paul D. Wolfowitz and Douglas J. Feith.



Mr. Rumsfeld toured the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad in 2004 in the wake of a prisoner-abuse scandal. David Hume Kennerly/Getty Images

While it was not up to Mr. Rumsfeld to fix troop strengths in Iraq, he was often blamed for keeping insufficient forces on the ground. And beyond his conduct of the war, many critics, including human rights groups and a bipartisan Senate committee, said he should face criminal charges for decisions that had led to the abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison, near Baghdad, and at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp in Cuba.

Mr. Rumsfeld, in his memoir, blamed “a small group of prison guards who ran amok in the absence of adequate supervision” for the Abu Ghraib abuse and said he regretted not having resigned in the wake of the scandal. He said that he had twice offered to quit, but that Mr. Bush had turned him down. He also portrayed his department as a reluctant jailer at Guantánamo Bay, and said that the interrogation techniques he had authorized were less extreme than some used by the C.I.A.

As the midterm elections of 2006 approached, with the war in its fourth year and public frustration at a pitch, Mr. Bush prepared to discard Mr. Rumsfeld, who had become a lightning rod for criticism of the war. Mr. Rumsfeld drafted an 11th-hour memo acknowledging that the Iraq strategy was not working and calling for a major course correction.

But it was too late. The chorus calling for his dismissal included the voices of many Republicans and senior military officials and, reportedly, that of the first lady, Laura Bush. The president publicly expressed his unconditional support, but after the Democrats won control of Congress, he announced Mr. Rumsfeld’s resignation and named Robert M. Gates, a former director of central intelligence, as his successor.

In retrospect, military experts gave Mr. Rumsfeld high marks for his first term in the Pentagon, and for trying to modernize the military in his second. But they faulted his handling of the Iraq war, held him to account for the mistreatment of prisoners, and said he had alienated colleagues and the public with his imperious style.



Mr. Rumsfeld being sworn in before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2004. He was called to testify about the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Stephen Jaffe/AFP Photo

He was defiant to the last, however. “I have benefited greatly from the criticism,” he said, invoking Winston Churchill on the day he resigned, “and at no time have I suffered from the lack thereof.”

In a statement released on Wednesday, former President Bush said he mourned “an exemplary public servant and a very good man.”

“On the morning of September 11, 2001,” he wrote, “Donald Rumsfeld ran to the fire at the Pentagon to assist the wounded and ensure the safety of survivors. For the next five years, he was in steady service as a wartime secretary of defense — a duty he carried out with strength, skill, and honor.”

A Son of Illinois

Donald Henry Rumsfeld was born in Evanston, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, on July 9, 1932, to George and Jeanette (Huster) Rumsfeld. His parents were successful real estate agents, and in 1937 the family moved to nearby Winnetka, where Donald and his sister, Joan, attended both private and public schools.

He was an excellent student and became an Eagle Scout and an athlete. After graduating from New Trier High School in 1950, he attended Princeton on scholarships, majored in political science, was captain of the wrestling and football teams and graduated in 1954.

That year he married his high school sweetheart, Joyce Pierson. She survives him, as do their three children, Valerie Richard, Marcy Rumsfeld and Nicholas Rumsfeld; seven grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren. Mr. Rumsfeld had homes in Washington and St. Michaels, Md., in addition to his ranch in Taos.

Mr. Rumsfeld joined the Navy in 1954 and became a jet fighter pilot and flight instructor. He left active service as a lieutenant (junior grade) in 1957, though he continued to fly and take administrative assignments in the Naval Reserve for many years.

He went to Washington in 1957 and for a few years was an aide to two Republican congressmen, David Dennison of Ohio and Robert Griffin of Michigan. The experience whetted his appetite for politics. After working briefly as a banker, Mr. Rumsfeld, at 30, won a seat in Congress as a Republican in 1962, representing an affluent district north of Chicago.

In the House he backed Representative Gerald R. Ford's successful bid for the Republican leadership and compiled a generally conservative voting record, opposing the social programs of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and taking a hard line on Cuba's dictator, Fidel Castro. But he also voted for the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and for freedom of information laws. He easily won re-election in 1964, 1966 and 1968.

In 1968, he was Richard M. Nixon's floor manager at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach and campaigned energetically in his successful race against Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey.



Mr. Rumsfeld being sworn in as director of the Office of Economic Opportunity at the White House in 1969. Looking on were President Nixon; Mr. Rumsfeld's wife, Joyce; and his 2-year-old son, Nicholas. Getty Images

Impressed with his performance, President Nixon in 1969 asked Mr. Rumsfeld to run the Office of Economic Opportunity, the federal antipoverty agency. Mr. Rumsfeld quit his House seat to accept the post.

The appointment alarmed critics. Mr. Rumsfeld had opposed the agency's creation, as well as food stamps and Medicare. He did not dismantle the agency, as some had feared, but he pared it down sharply.

Mr. Rumsfeld became known as a tough administrator who slashed costs and personnel in social programs, and as an aggressive bureaucratic infighter who made enemies but got things done. In 1971 and 1972, he ran President Nixon's Cost of Living Council, administering wage and price controls. He also joined the inner circle of Nixon advisers, including his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, and his domestic adviser, John D. Ehrlichman.

But as the Watergate scandal began to disrupt the White House in 1973, Mr. Rumsfeld was named ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He was thus in Brussels when Nixon and many of his top aides were forced to resign. After Vice President Ford assumed the presidency in 1974, Mr. Rumsfeld was called back to the White House as his chief of staff. He soon installed his own aides and a staff system that diminished the influence of others.

Memos Like Snowflakes

When Ford named him defense secretary in 1975, Mr. Rumsfeld faced formidable problems. The Vietnam War had ended, and an all-volunteer force was in its infancy. Troop morale was low, drug scandals and racial tensions were rife, and his predecessor, James R. Schlesinger, had been fired, partly for clashing with Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger and others.

Although Mr. Rumsfeld was steeped in Washington's wiles, he knew little about the Pentagon. But he learned fast and tried to fit into the macho military world by demonstrating his one-handed push-ups and his prowess on a squash court. His memos — a hallmark of Rumsfeld communications in government and the private sector for years — began drifting down on the Pentagon and came to be known as snowflakes.

Publicly warning of "adverse trends" — meaning Soviet strengths and American weaknesses — Mr. Rumsfeld called for buildups of conventional and strategic forces, budget increases and the development of cruise missiles, B-1 bombers, F-16 fighters and other weapons systems. It was an ambitious program for what proved to be a limited term.



Mr. Rumsfeld with President Ford in 1975, when he was the White House chief of staff. Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

President Ford's defeat by Jimmy Carter in the 1976 presidential election cut Mr. Rumsfeld's tenure to just 14 months, too short for sweeping initiatives. But he made a strong impression as an able steward of the Pentagon bureaucracy; he even once managed to outmaneuver Mr. Kissinger spectacularly by withdrawing Pentagon support for an arms control agreement that Mr. Kissinger was on the verge of completing in Moscow in 1976.

The move killed SALT II negotiations for the remainder of the Ford administration, depriving the president of a major foreign policy coup. Nevertheless, Ford in 1977 awarded Mr. Rumsfeld the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Leaving government for the first time in 15 years, Mr. Rumsfeld became president and chief executive of G.D. Searle & Company, the pharmaceutical maker, which was struggling. He turned the company around by cutting costs, selling subsidiaries and developing the artificial sweetener NutraSweet, which made billions after its approval by the Food and Drug Administration. In 1985, the company was sold to Monsanto, a move that made Mr. Rumsfeld wealthy.

On leave from Searle for six months in 1983 and 1984, Mr. Rumsfeld was President Reagan's special envoy to the Middle East. He became a conduit for extending American intelligence and military aid to Iraq, then at war with neighboring Iran. American support for Iraq's dictatorship and Mr. Rumsfeld's meetings with President Hussein were not particularly controversial at a time of mounting concern over the expansion of Iran's Islamic revolution.

Having flirted with political races from time to time, Mr. Rumsfeld explored runs for the United States Senate in 1986 and for the Republican presidential nomination in 1988 and 1996, but did not pursue them. In 1996, he was the national campaign chairman for Senator Bob Dole, the Republican

presidential nominee, who lost to the incumbent, Bill Clinton.

Making His Fortune

From 1990 to 1993, Mr. Rumsfeld was chairman and chief executive of the General Instrument Corporation, an electronics manufacturer that specialized in cable, satellite and ground-based broadcasting applications and pioneered the first all-digital high-definition television technology. Mr. Rumsfeld took the company public and made another fortune.

From 1997 to 2001, he was chairman of Gilead Sciences, the developer of Tamiflu, used in the treatment of bird flu. After he became defense secretary in 2001, he recused himself from any decisions involving Gilead, but his holdings in the company grew substantially when avian flu prompted widespread anxiety over a possible pandemic.

Over the years, questions were raised about Mr. Rumsfeld's work as a director of many corporations, including some defense contractors. But he denied any wrongdoing, and none was ever demonstrated.

His complex character — he was a creative and dedicated reformer to admirers, a vain and egotistical bully to detractors — was the subject of endless debate and analysis in public forums, newspaper and magazine articles, television documentaries and books.



Mr. Rumsfeld meeting troops in Afghanistan in December 2001, weeks after the war there had begun in the wake of 9/11. Pablo Martinez Monsivais/Reuters

Andrew Cockburn, in “Rumsfeld: His Rise, Fall and Catastrophic Legacy” (2007), called him an inveterate schemer who had tried to evade responsibility for disastrous failures.

Bradley Graham's "By His Own Rules: The Ambitions, Successes and Ultimate Failures of Donald Rumsfeld" (2009) drew a more nuanced portrait of a man of wisdom, ruthlessness and ambition, but concluded that Iraq had doomed his career and the lives of thousands.

On the day of Mr. Rumsfeld's resignation, Mr. Graham wrote, "the tally of U.S. troops who had died in the Iraq war had reached 2,939," the "number wounded in action had exceeded 22,000," and "countless others were mentally and emotionally traumatized from the nightmarish conflict."

In 2007, after leaving government service, Mr. Rumsfeld created the Rumsfeld Foundation to encourage public service with study fellowships and grants to support the growth of free political and economic systems abroad.

He was the subject of a documentary, "The Unknown Known" (2014), by the filmmaker Errol Morris, who interviewed him about his years of government service. The title, like that of Mr. Rumsfeld's memoir, "Known and Unknown," referred both to his comments at a 2002 news conference in which he spoke of "known knowns," "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns" and to a memo he wrote, which he read aloud in the film, in which he explained that "unknown knowns" are "the things you think you know, that it turns out you did not."

Alex Traub contributed reporting.