

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

Rumsfeld's Review

WHEN the Bush Administration took office six months ago, it was greeted with enormous goodwill by the defense community. The armed forces, used hard and poorly supported in the Clinton era, were in bad shape.

After years of underfunding and lack of force modernization, the services are in bad shape. Airplanes and other weapons are wearing out. Readiness is down. The services need at least \$50 billion more a year just to avoid further deterioration.

The Bush campaign had promised a stronger defense and said that "help is on the way." The return of the tough-minded former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was taken as another good sign.

Things did not happen as expected. The new White House team concentrated its energy on a tax cut. Decisions about a defense increase were set aside, pending a review of requirements by Rumsfeld.

The President told Congress, "Our military was shaped to confront the challenge of the past, so I have asked the Secretary of Defense to review America's armed forces and prepare to transform them to meet emerging threats."

Other descriptions of the coming review were similar.

Rumsfeld decided to conduct his study behind closed doors, relying on a limited number of trusted insiders. He was no doubt aware that previous reviews, including the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) in 1997, led to little change, largely because vested Pentagon interests ambushed any ideas that threatened them.

This time, however, the secrecy would lead to a different set of problems.

The strategy review was to be done by Andrew Marshall, 79, director of the Office of the Net Assessment, cult figure in the Pentagon, and leading prophet of the technological Revolution in Military Affairs. More than a dozen panels were also appointed to study other matters.

On May 8, Rumsfeld announced a major initiative to put more empha-

sis on space and make the Air Force the Department of Defense's executive agent for space, but that announcement was an exception. Those who knew what the panels were doing weren't talking.

The review eclipsed the QDR, which went into standby mode. Rumors abounded: Rumsfeld was going to kill a fighter program, dump the two-conflict standard for sizing

The closed-door approach led to problems, and they are not over yet.

the armed forces, cut big deck aircraft carriers, cut Army divisions.

There was no visible effort to correct the rumors or the expectations. Discontent, alarm, and confusion grew. It spread from the armed forces and Congress to the news media.

Rumsfeld, surprised by the misunderstanding, launched a news media blitz. He said the services had not been excluded from the review. There had been many meetings, but it was not possible to meet with everybody.

As he explained it, the big study wasn't that secret, nor was it that big. The panel work was exploratory in nature. If some expected a Rumsfeld plan for reorganizing the military, "it certainly never came out of my mouth that way," he told PBS.

No decisions had been made about weapons or programs. The issue of troop cuts had never come up. Defense strategy might not change. The panel findings would be rolled into a souped-up QDR.

After a meeting with Rumsfeld May 24, Sen. Carl Levin, the new chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said: "I don't have a good grasp on where the Secretary is headed. I don't think the Secretary has a good grasp on where the Secretary is headed."

Revelation of the grand plan was said to be just around the corner. Informed sources said Bush would declare the new defense strategy in a speech at Annapolis May 25. His statement was good, but limited and short: "I'm committed to building a future force that is defined less by size and more by mobility and swiftness, one that is easier to deploy and sustain, one that relies more heavily on stealth, precision weaponry, and information technologies."

In June, the panel leaders began talking publicly, but they did not attribute their views or proposals to Rumsfeld.

The Administration proposes a defense budget supplement of \$5.6 billion for this year, which barely dents the requirement. Further increases may be coming in the "placeholder" budget in 2002 and the "transformation" budget in 2003.

However, the once-huge federal surplus is vanishing fast, gone to pay for the tax cut and other federal programs that got in line ahead of defense. Bush and Rumsfeld will need large amounts to correct critical problems in defense and to pay for recapitalization and readiness. And that covers only the "help is on the way" problems. Transformation costs would be extra.

Despite all that has happened, many defense people still give Rumsfeld a "wait and see" professional courtesy. Some of his support is likely to diminish, however, when and if he begins identifying specific programs as bill payers for his plans.

Rumsfeld may not have perceived himself as moving mysteriously or secretly, but many others saw it that way. His approach may have alienated some who would have been his allies. Conducting business behind closed doors has never worked in Washington.

There is genuine support for transformation and for the strengthening of national defense. To gain and channel that support, Rumsfeld is going to have to build some consensus. And soon. ■