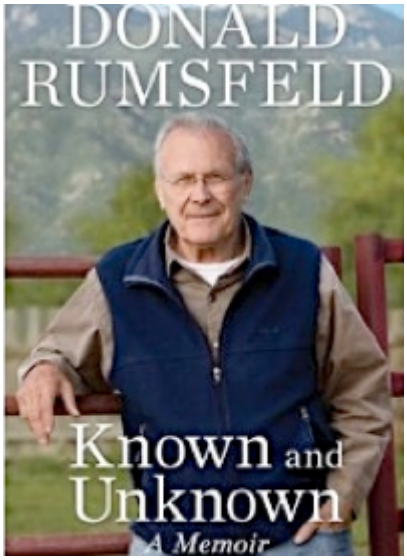
Written by **Daniel Sayani** on February 28, 2011

Rumsfeld's "Known and Unknown": An Interventionist, Neocon Manifesto



Donald Rumsfeld, the former Secretary of Defense under President George W. Bush, has jumped on the literary bandwagon earlier this month with the publication and release of his memoirs, Known and Unknown, titled after one of his many abstruse statements and quotes given to the press during one of his infamous press conferences on the "global war on terror": "Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know."

Rumsfeld's choice of titles is most revealing and is an intriguing window into what lies within his book. He paints a rich and multifaceted narrative of both the public and private aspects of himself, and portrays a bifurcated self — what psychologist Carl Jung conceived of as the two-dimensional psyche, dichotomized as the persona self and shadow self, the former the image of ourselves portrayed to the world as an almost mask-like entity, and the latter the true, inner, often ominous, fallible, fully human, self-doubting, and shameful self hidden from others.

Getting to know the true Rumsfeld, while not absolving him of his policy decisions and blunders, offers tremendous insight into a figure that would otherwise remain unknown to the public as a whole. In this aspect, his memoir reads very much like and bears numerous similarities to the autobiography of former President Richard M. Nixon.

Rumsfeld seems to be convinced on the innermost level that his advocacy of invading Iraq was justified, as he states numerous times that the world is better off without Saddam Hussein. However, he expresses regret over the handling of the war, giving the impression of an individual who is uninterested in long-term occupation of Iraq. Surprisingly, he relates many disagreements with President George W. Bush, and for this reason, one should read Rumsfeld's memoirs along with Bush's to get a full glimpse of this period in our history, as he highlights his complicated relationship with Bush.

He carefully writes about Bush with respect and, at times, admiration, and he expresses absolutely no resentment about being forced out by the president after the 2006 midterm elections that handed Congress over to Democrats. He credits Bush with protecting the country after 9/11, and recounts choking up in the Oval Office when Bush expressed concern over Rumsfeld's son, Nick, who was battling drug addiction at the time.

More broadly, Rumsfeld defends the president against the public caricature of him. "I found him to be unlike the picture the press was drawing of him as uncurious and something of a slacker," he writes of his first substantive meeting with Bush in 1999 before he was elected president. "He asked serious questions, was self-confident, and had a command of the important issues."

But Rumsfeld also makes clear that he differed with Bush on some critical issues. He had little interest in the "freedom agenda" espoused by Bush. He writes that the president should have found ways of asking Americans to share in the burdens of the war on terror by weaning off foreign oil or volunteering for military or civilian duty. And for that matter, he does not like the term "war on terror," arguing that Bush should have framed it more forthrightly as a struggle against Islamist extremists.

He faults Bush, at least implicitly, for a dysfunctional National Security Council policymaking process that pitted departments and major figures against each other and created a confusing chain of command for Iraq under Bremer. "NSC meetings with the president," he writes, "did not always end with clear conclusions and instructions."

Unlike other neoconservatives in the Bush administration, Rumsfeld says he rejects a Wilsonian foreign policy of exporting democracy and building nations in accordance with egalitarian ideals. He does not seem to believe that there is any inherent benefit to democracy over other forms of government, and rejects the notion that democracies are more conducive to a peaceful world. To the contrary, he says the Iraq war was purely for the purpose of defending national security, despite the evidence that Saddam Hussein posed no imminent threat to American or global security, and that the destabilization of Iraq emboldened a more heinous, destructive, and malignant force with nuclear capabilities — Iran.

He says that the Mideast would be "far more perilous" with Saddam Hussein still in power and credits Bush and an "aggressive, unrelenting offensive against the enemy" for preventing another 9/11. Rumsfeld finishes the book on a self-satisfied note, stating that Obama has largely "kept in place the most contentious and widely derided Bush administration policies" — terrorists are still not accorded Prisoner of War (POW) status, Guantanamo Bay remains open, terrorist suspects are still being tried in military commissions rather than civilian courts, and electronic surveillance and drone attacks continue. Obama's "latter-day support" of these Bush-era decisions, he asserts, "are the correct ones."

As for his claim that Iraq had WMDs, Rumsfeld defensively notes that history is rife with examples of flawed intelligence affecting national security decisions, from Vietnam and the Cold War to the Iranian revolution and Chinese missile deployments. Amid the drumbeat over WMDs in the prelude to the invasion, Rumsfeld believes he provided the voice of reason. Writing a note to himself, he once penned "caution — strong case," but added, "could be wrong."

Rumsfeld also goes on to discuss his use of egregiously unconstitutional tactics in "homeland security" — most notably roving wiretaps, and other forms of search and seizure in violation of the First and Fourth Amendments — as provisions of the Patriot Act, believing that its provisions are necessary for the upkeep of national security. He ignores Thomas Jefferson's warning that those who sacrifice liberty for the sake of security "deserve neither." This is unsurprising, given his proud acceptance of the "Defender of the Constitution Award," presented to him at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).

Rumsfeld, however, does express opposition to and regret over the numerous human rights violations which occurred in the course of the Pentagon's treatment of enemy combatants. Unlike John Yoo, who defended the use of tactics that can be construed as constituting torture and offenses against human

dignity, Rumsfeld confidently expresses opposition to these tactics, and says that he never approved of the Pentagon using water-boarding, stripping, or other brutal techniques during interrogations. As for his decision to allow tough techniques to be used on al-Qaida suspect Muhammad al-Qahtani, he claims he suspended such approval as soon as he learned the interrogation might be construed as mistreatment.

Interestingly, he portrays himself as a man of morals and integrity, a disputable characterization. He is careful to devote ample space in the book to the fact that he was no defender of what occurred as part of the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal, where Iraqi prisoners were portrayed in numerous sexual and sadistic poses. Rumsfeld divulges that he tried to quit twice in the wake of the scandal, which he laments “left me feeling punched in the gut." Saying he felt his resignation would demonstrate accountability and help the administration move beyond the scandal, he gave letters to Bush, who refused and instead suggested firing Gen. Richard Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But selfless Rumsfeld scotched that idea.

Whether his moralistic assertions are true, or constitute a feeble attempt to rewrite a positive, glowing historical legacy for himself, is a decision best left up to the reader, although history and common sense indicate that Rumsfeld is revising truth to make himself seem more palatable.

He claims Bush and Cheney repeatedly persuaded him to stay, and that once even Bill Clinton told him at a WWII memorial dedication that "No one with an ounce of sense thinks you had any way in the world to know about the abuse taking place that night in Iraq."

Rumsfeld now regrets his decision to remain on, calling it a misjudgment because it contributed to the drumbeat of "torture" maintained by "partisan" critics of the war and Bush. Interestingly, he thinks that all the pictures from the episode should have been released because it would have demonstrated it was the fault of just a few bad apples.

Whether or not one is a fan of Rumsfeld, his memoir is a captivating new look into some of the crucial episodes of the past decade of American history. Becoming familiar with one of the country’s most enigmatic figures on such an intimate level offers a new perspective into the persona that is Donald Rumsfeld.