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The Best Defense; **Donald Rumsfeld's** Overwhelming Show of Force on the Public Relations Front

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Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense, stands at the lectern with a Cheshire Cat grin so expansive that his lips have disappeared. The reporters fill their molded plywood seats. One of the generals -- they're all tall dour fellows with big ears -- is posted like a four-star straight man in uniform beside the real star in pinstripes.

It's another episode of The Rummy Show. In today's plot twist, the war is going well, and members of the Pentagon press corps demand to know why. After weeks reporting the sputtering pace of the offensive, they are assembled one November afternoon in the Pentagon briefing room. Why has the Taliban faded so fast?

"Well, I'm not a psychiatrist," says the secretary in a sparring mood. "There's no way I can climb in their heads, individually or collectively, and know why they're doing what they're doing."

He was a scrappy college wrestler, and now he's a ruthless squash player. In both sports, as in war and Pentagon briefings, it's effective to get your opponent off balance, then strike. He finishes his answer with a teaching on Special Forces, enhanced bomb targeting, Northern Alliance troops -- then the kicker: "That combination has done a good deal to kill Taliban and al Qaeda troops."

He is comfortable with the verb "to kill." It is a refreshing departure from the old Pentagon-speak of obfuscation and euphemism. During this 35-minute briefing Rumsfeld will use "kill" nine times in various tenses and gerunds. The general standing next to him, also answering questions, never says "kill." He does say, "We have degraded their command and control."

A reporter raises his hand. What's the justification for attacking troops in retreat?

Rumsfeld's eyes narrow and his mouth forms a toothy cavern of incredulity. "They have been obviously offered an

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opportunity to surrender," he explains as if to someone very young. "And they are not surrendering."

But isn't the secretary worried that these tough tactics will drive the enemy to commit a last desperate act of terrorism?

"The idea that you could appease them by stopping doing what we're doing . . . is just utter nonsense," Rumsfeld fires back. "It's kind of like feeding an alligator, hoping it eats you last."

The reporters start laughing, the secretary of defense starts laughing, and no doubt some in the cable audience at home are laughing.

The Rummy Show has aired two or three times a week since bombs-away on Oct. 7, and it's a direct hit. The best zingers make the nightly news and next day's paper. Members of the public call the Pentagon to find out when Rumsfeld -- whose friends call him Rummy -- will be on television next. Nielsen Media Research figures that something like 800,000 people watch his appearances live on cable -- not much by broadcast network standards, but respectable for cable and astronomical for that wonkish kabuki, the Washington briefing.

So never mind the generals, skip the president. Rumsfeld is the Articulator in Chief of this perilous national effort, which he does not stoop to call in public by its marketing brand name, Enduring Freedom.

Of course there is plenty Rumsfeld won't disclose about the war, and he's impishly frank about that, too. Asked once if he could say anything about ongoing ground operations, Rumsfeld responded: "I could. I won't. I have no desire to discuss the subject."

He gives us war, but with a twinkle. This has been very good for the war -- and very good for a formerly beleaguered Cabinet member whose finest hours once were said to have passed with the Cold War.

A giant American flag dangles from a construction crane above a missing section of the Pentagon the morning of Dec. 11, three months to the hour after a hijacked airplane slammed into the building. Rumsfeld leads Pentagon employees in a solemn commemoration.

"In Afghanistan today," he says, "our fighting forces are teaching the al Qaeda terrorists a lesson, a lesson not taught in the camps that trained them to murder and to terrorize."

Rumsfeld has played more roles than most Washington players, but this one is new.

Yes, he was secretary of defense for 14 months at the end of the Ford administration, when he helped scuttle an arms control agreement, warned about the Soviet Union and secured the first Pentagon budget increase in years. But there wasn't a hot war on. His thick insider re[acute]sume[acute] boasts no track record for reaching out to the masses, for making a case over and over in a public spotlight -- and, incidentally, soaring from relative obscurity to a 78 percent approval rating in a recent Harris Poll.

He came to Washington four decades ago as a 30-year-old elected to Congress from a district outside Chicago. After three terms he joined the Nixon administration and in succeeding years became known as a maestro of the stealthy bureaucratic maneuver, the calculated leak, the hidden power play.

When he ran Defense the first time around at the tender age of 43, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak columnized that Rumsfeld was "one of Washington's most cold-blooded infighters."

"Rumsfeld afforded me a close-up look at a special Washington phenomenon: the skilled full-time politician-bureaucrat in whom ambition, ability and substance fuse seamlessly," former secretary of state Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoirs.

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When George W. Bush originally summoned Rumsfeld for an encore at the Pentagon, the main assignment was to use some of that insider savvy to "transform" the military -- drag it kicking and screaming into a millennium mined with a scary set of "asymmetric" threats: little bad guys with big evil intentions. This would mean navigating jealously guarded frontiers of power staked out by Congress, the service branches, the defense contractor establishment. It would take a quick study and a smooth behind-the-scenes operator.

But by summertime, retired generals, current officers and civilian experts were sniping at him in the press, and some pundits speculated he'd be the first Cabinet member to go. Rumsfeld's defenders said the squawking was to be expected, while critics wondered if Rummy had lost his touch.

What's different about Rummy now?

Nothing, say friends who know him.

"What people are seeing now is what we have known for 30 years," says Kenneth Adelman, a Reagan administration arms control official who worked for Rumsfeld three times in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. "He's incredibly honest, he's incredibly quick, he's incredibly efficient."

"The talk of a new and improved **Donald Rumsfeld** is more a reflection of the people observing him than of him," says a close aide to the secretary of defense. (Victoria Clarke, Rumsfeld's spokeswoman, said he didn't have time to be interviewed for this article.)

What's happening instead, friends suggest, is that a side of the man that has always been present, if hidden from the public, is coming to the fore. After 40 years as politician, administrator, diplomat, businessman, wise-man-on-call, the most successful transformation in the last three months is of Rumsfeld's image.

He left Washington the last time when Jimmy Carter beat Ford. He had a Presidential Medal of Freedom and next to no savings. With his wife, Joyce, and their three children, Rumsfeld returned to Chicago and commenced to make multi-millions in business. He still thought he would make a great president, but his attempt to mount a campaign in 1988 fizzled.

Think what he could be up to now, at 69. He could be playing with grandkids, managing his \$ 6.2 million charitable foundation. He could reflect on his place in the annals of Defense as the hard-liner who launched the Pentagon's post-Vietnam budget buildup. He could be swilling Diet Coke with the secure knowledge that if not for his turnaround of pharmaceutical giant G.D. Searle & Co. and successful touting of the sweetener **aspartame**, the beverage would not be possible.

History might have remembered him for some of that. Not anymore.

"He certainly seems to have found the role of a lifetime as wartime defense secretary," says Andrew Krepinevich, executive director of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

But this return engagement in Washington does have a new quality: There's no place else to go, no higher rung in the game -- not for a 69-year-old. There's nothing left except to play this encore to the hilt. It must be liberating for a veteran Washington striver.

"In '75-76 I thought he was extremely ambitious, as you'd expect from a young public person," says Kissinger, who was Ford's secretary of state. "Now I think there's a great serenity about him, that this is the fulfillment of someone wanting to do public service."

The war was several weeks old when Rumsfeld returned from a grueling four-day trip to Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and India.

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Back at his home west of Dupont Circle, he told Joyce -- his high school sweetheart and wife of 47 years -- that he might be coming down with a cold.

Mrs. Leber wouldn't like to hear that, said Joyce Rumsfeld.

Mrs. Leber? She's here! We must pay her a visit, said the secretary of defense.

That would be Serena Leber, 91. Young Donald and his friends used to cut her grass and work around her house, back when they were students with Leber's daughter, Nellie, a friend of Joyce's, at New Trier High School outside Chicago. Now Leber lives in an apartment in Kensington, and is a faithful fan of The Rummy Show. She'll call up her daughter and report, "Don was good today!" Rumsfeld hasn't seen her in years.

The following Sunday, Rumsfeld waxed blunt and wry on "Fox News Sunday" and "Face the Nation": "If you're chasing a chicken around the barnyard, are you close or are you not close until you get him?" That afternoon, he and Joyce Rumsfeld headed to Kensington. Over tea and home-baked oatmeal cookies, they spent 40 minutes with Leber and her daughter talking about family and old times.

"He was laughing, he was smiling, he got up to get another cookie," Nellie Leber Longworth recounts later. "He's a man of great affection for family, and he's a loyal friend."

It's a typical wartime interlude for the secretary of defense, say his friends. Rumsfeld holds close a long trail of friends from New Trier, Princeton, Chicago, Washington. Many sent messages of support when war broke out, and were pleasantly surprised to receive personal notes in response.

Those who have seen Rumsfeld beyond the confines of The Rummy Show say he is confident, balanced, relaxed. He arrives at the office 6:30 a.m., leaves with a full briefcase around 8 p.m., works part of the weekend. Beyond that, sure, he can take in a Wizards game, a Redskins game, attend Christ Church Georgetown, have dinner with friends, invite Pentagon colleagues and their families over to his house. A nervous secretary of defense, now that would be frightening.

"He's the same personality," says Frank Carlucci, a secretary of defense under President Reagan who worked for Rumsfeld in the Nixon administration. "I don't see any difference between him in private and what you see in public."

On a trip to Illinois to review young sailors, Rumsfeld dropped by the Wrigley Building in Chicago, where he kept an office until tapped by Bush, and visited his old friend Ed Brennan, the former chairman of Sears.

"If anything he looks younger than he did when he left here eight months ago," Brennan says later. To Brennan, there's no mystery. "When you're in command of the information and the situation, then you're not under the stress people think you are. People are under a lot more stress when they are trying to make things look like they really aren't."

Another side of Rumsfeld comes out on the squash court. The "third-best body" at Princeton, according to the 1954 yearbook, is still in good shape. If someone's briefing him at the office, he'll stand pumping a little iron while he listens.

The squash court is in the athletic facility at the Pentagon. Rumsfeld plays less frequently with a war on, but grabs a racket when he can, challenging an aide or a friend.

"He plays to win and gives everything he possibly has," says Keene Addington, a Chicago restaurateur who opened two Flat Top Grill outlets in the Washington area. He's nearly 30 years younger than Rumsfeld, and they play a few times a month. "I consider myself a better player, but I would say 55 percent of the time he beats me, and that's because of his competitive energies and juices."

Remember the military briefings of yesteryear?

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It was 1991, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and there was "Stormin' " Norman Schwarzkopf decked out in desert camouflage managing the press and charming the public like a character airlifted from Hollywood. In the Pentagon briefing room, Gen. Colin Powell was equally mesmerizing holding forth as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In that war, the uniforms, not the pinstripes, crafted the daily narrative of how America was fighting the good fight. Who was the secretary of defense again? Oh yeah, Dick Cheney. Now elevated to a secure undisclosed location.

Rummy as the camera-ready secretary of defense was born on Sept. 11. He and his staff decided that he would play a key role framing the war for the public.

"It was a conscious decision," says his aide. "It seemed a proper thing to do to have him out there explaining what the circumstances are." The war on terrorism is a type of conflict the American public has never experienced before, and Rumsfeld "is very good at explaining what that means in practice," says the aide.

This is a relatively new conception of the role of secretary of defense.

"If there is a public face to this war, it is clearly Secretary Rumsfeld's face," says Kurt Campbell, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense under President Clinton. "In the past in both Democratic and Republican administrations there has been an inclination to have military people in uniform explain complex military operations."

In his briefings, Rumsfeld is careful to emphasize that the battle plan has been devised by the generals, subject to approval farther up the chain of command. But Rumsfeld is the one who gets most of the questions at joint briefings. He's the one sought on the Sunday morning talk shows and "Larry King Live." He's the one who holds forth on sidewalks around town when reporters stake out his movements.

"In many respects this very public role harks back to the McNamara era, who was really the last secretary of defense to at least initially revel in the public explanation of war," Campbell says.

Many analysts draw comparisons to that secretary of the Vietnam War era, but the analogy is not perfect. Robert McNamara laced his briefings with statistics, as though war were a theorem to be proved. Rumsfeld's style tends toward the Socratic, spiced with colorful imagery and sprinkled with "gosh" and "oh goodness" and "you bet!"

McNamara was eventually perceived as spinning an increasingly controversial war across a yawning credibility gap. Rumsfeld's word is good so far.

Back in the briefing room, the press is assembled again. Rumsfeld's haircut hasn't changed since the Nixon administration. His rimless spectacles give him an antique professorial look, which befits his learned-sounding riffs on subjects such as, say, global improvements in tunnel-building technology.

He thinks before he speaks. "I like to engage my brain before my mouth," he tells reporters. The result is the most effective deployment of the pregnant pause since Harold Pinter started writing plays.

How will the military treat the young American captured as a Taliban fighter?

Pause.

"I guess the honest answer is that I do know a bit about the various options, and I have not landed on one at the moment."

One of his skills is the non-answer. For weeks he has dodged questions about how the military tribunals will work.

"As I've said to you folks, it is something we intend to do very carefully in a very thoughtful way after a good consideration and discussion with knowledgeable people from across the country who have background and experience

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in these subjects."

"Saturday Night Live" spoofed The Rummy Show, a signal moment in the career of a Washington player. Would he be a stumbler, like Rumsfeld's old boss Ford as portrayed by Chevy Chase? Or a bumbler like his new boss Bush at the hands of Will Ferrell?

In this case, the reporters are played as nincompoops going up against Rumsfeld the wily, sadistic briefer.

Rummy to reporters: "Well, first of all, you're beginning with an illogical premise and proceeding perfectly logically to an illogical conclusion, which is a dangerous thing to do. . . . I think we ought to have a new rule: You can ask two questions, and then we can pick the one we want to answer."

Oh wait, those comments are from actual Rumsfeld briefings. Here's Darrell Hammond as Rumsfeld on "Saturday Night": "Is it fair? I imagine my reply would be that life itself is not fair. In war, one tries to maximize one's advantage, fair or unfair, wherever possible."

The Rummy Show is good for laughs, lively skirmishing about deadly skirmishing, but that's only part of what keeps us tuning in day after day. He speaks of war as a projection of will. It's an apt description of this more fully realized Rumsfeld, and it's good television.

There's a moment in every episode when Rummy sets his jaw and narrows his eyes, and tells us about conflict, and America, and deeds history will remember.

"In the end, war is not about statistics, deadlines, short attention spans or 24-hour news cycles. It's about will, the projection of will, the clear unambiguous determination of the president of the United States . . . and the American people to see this through to certain victory.

"In other American wars, enemy commanders have come to doubt the wisdom of taking on the strength and power of this nation and the resolve of her people. I expect that somewhere in a cave in Afghanistan there's a terrorist leader who is at this moment considering precisely the same thing."

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