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Rumsfeld vs. Rice, Re: Meetings

| [More](#)^[1]

| February 23, 2011

| [Benjamin H. Friedman](#)^[2]

A lot of interesting stuff is left out of both Donald Rumsfeld's [book](#)^[3] and the [memos](#)^[4] that he posted online to accompany it. No mention is made of the episode where Rumsfeld [purged](#)^[5] officials deemed insufficiently loyal from the post-invasion planning cell he set up for Iraq. There's no trace of his [use of Newt Gingrich](#)^[6] as an adjunct war planner for the invasion. The same goes for Richard Perle's [resignation](#)^[7] as Chairman of the Defense Policy Board after [revelation](#)^[8] of his conflicts of interest.

But Rumsfeld does not hide his view that Condoleeza Rice did a terrible job running the National Security Council. As I discussed in [my last post](#)^[9], Rumsfeld, who had of course served as Chief of Staff and Secretary of Defense in the Ford Administration, has strong ideas about how governmental processes ought to work. His critique of Rice, laid out in chapter twenty four, has two parts. First, he dislikes how she organized and ran meetings. More substantively, he believes she did poor job forcing decisions and steering policy.

It's not clear whether Rumsfeld ever shared the latter concern with Rice or the President.* He certainly let them know about the first. Between 2001 and 2005, when she moved to State, he sent her a raft of memos (some footnoted on page 328), suggesting improvements. He eventually had subordinates track her compliance with his requests, even though she had acceded to few of them and showed it the President (see the May 24, 2004 memo discussed below). The memos are worth reading for their pithy abrasiveness alone. Most copy other principals. Here's a partial summary.

[May 4, 2001](#)^[10]: Rumsfeld complains to Powell and Rice that someone drafted defense-related talking points for the President without consulting his staff.

[July 27, 2001](#)^[11]: Rumsfeld suggests principals (top national security officials) and NSC (essentially the same group plus the President) meetings on Iraq to force a decision on policy. To drive home the urgency, he wrongly predicts that Iran will have nuclear weapons within five years, further unsettling the region. He writes in the book (p. 419) that Iraq policy was "adrift" at the time, which goes to show that sometimes having no policy is better than having one.

[September 25, 2001](#)^[12]: Rumsfeld complains to Rice that she is cutting him out of conversations with his Russian counterpart.

[October 10, 2001](#)^[13]: Following up on a complaint he raised two weeks before, Rumsfeld informs Rice that though she has asked him not to bring assistants to NSC meetings, he is going to do it anyway. She and Cheney have assistants there, he points out, so it's only fair.

[November 12, 2001](#)^[14]: As U.S. forces drive the Taliban from power, Rumsfeld complains to Rice and Powell about their public statements that "we don't want to take Kabul." That decision, he writes, should be made by the military commander or conveyed to him by Rumsfeld after an NSC meeting. His entire final paragraph reads, "What in the world is going on?"

[December 5, 2001](#)^[15]: Rumsfeld writes Rice's deputy, Stephen Hadley, about an NSC paper on prisoners taken in Afghanistan. Rumsfeld notes they have not discussed the issue in a meeting, complains that the paper seems to posit that the NSC makes policy, which is improper, and says that NSC papers should never mention the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as the two bodies have no direct legal relationship.

[December 13, 2001](#)^[16]: Rumsfeld arrives at principals meeting where Rice has asked him not to bring subordinates to find her attended by several assistants. Afterwards, he writes a memo complaining that he felt like a "one-armed paper

hanger” and will bring someone with him in the future, despite her instructions.

December 27, 2001 [17]: Rice has started to attach a disclaimer to memos that the principals will be considered to have approved the issue under discussion unless they object within a given time. Rumsfeld rejects this idea, arguing that he and Powell travel often and can't always review memos in a timely manner. In another memo, sent New Year's Eve, he reiterates the point, noting that the practice gives others an “inaccurate impression” that he has agreed to things.

August 20, 2002 [18]: Rumsfeld sends Rice a paper he has had his staff prepare on how to improve the NSC process. It asks for fewer, shorter meetings, fewer principals-only meetings, fewer rescheduled meetings, that meeting summaries be improved, and that discussion papers be sent out sooner. It explains how those papers should be written (i.e., with bullet points). It says nothing should be assumed decided unless explicitly decided upon by the principals.

September 13, 2002 [19]: Rumsfeld writes to Rice that he is due to testify before the House and Senate Armed Service Committees the next week on resolutions concerning Iraq that the administration is preparing for Congress and the UN. He cannot prepare testimony, he writes, because he has not seen the draft of either resolution. He then observes that the administration has “put the cart before the horse” in offering intelligence briefings on the Hill without being clear on its policy objectives and thus what the briefings are meant to accomplish. By “policy objectives,” Rumsfeld means how to make the case for war, not whether to have one, although he mentions possibility the President could decide against it.

October 16, 2002 [20]: Rumsfeld writes Rice about that day's NSC meeting on Israel / Palestine. He suggests how NSC should summarize the meeting, complains that he didn't get the discussion paper until the last minute, despite his staff's requests, and claims that she misled the President at the meeting by saying that the Deputies Committee had prepared the paper.

December 2, 2002 [21]: Rumsfeld informs Rice that because he has failed in his efforts to stop her staff from assigning tasks to the Joint Chiefs and Combatant Commanders, contrary to the chain of command, he has drafted a memo, which he attached, instructing them to ignore NSC tasking. The second of the two paragraphs reads:

You are making a mistake. You and the NSC staff need to understand that you are not in the chain of command. Since you cannot seem to accept that fact, my only choices are to go to the President and ask him to tell you to stop or to tell anyone in DoD not to respond to you or the NSC staff. I have decided to take the latter course. If it fails, I'll have to go to the President. One way or the other, it will stop, while I am Secretary of Defense.

October 30, 2003 [22]: Rumsfeld complains to Rice that the next scheduled NSC meeting has no subject and therefore he can't prepare for it. A week later he again complains [23] that meeting schedules change too frequently and briefing papers come too late.

November 11, 2003 [24]: Rumsfeld asks Rice to stop her staff from contacting Combatant Commanders to arrange briefings and go through his office instead. He then instructs [25] the Command Staffs to ignore such NSC requests unless they come through him. The next month he tells Rice [26] to stop inviting Combatant Commanders and their staff to principals meetings.

May 29, 2004 [27]: Rumsfeld learned as a pharmaceutical executive (p. 247) that “what you measure improves.” This memo, from the Lieutenant General serving as Rumsfeld's military assistant, measures Rice's performance in complying with his ideas on how she should run meetings. It compares fall 2002 and 2003, tracking how many meetings occurred, what portion got cancelled, how far in advance cancellation occurred, how many meetings had pre-existing topics and agendas, how often the agendas changed, how far in advance discussion papers were circulated, and how often the NSC produced summaries.

The stats show improvement. For example, while the NSC never circulated a discussion paper 48 hours in advance in fall 2002, it did so nine percent of the time in fall 2003. Rumsfeld doesn't say if he took the data as affirmation of this theory, but a handwritten marginal note indicates that he presented it the President.

June 9, 2006 [28]: Rumsfeld requests a meeting with new White House Chief of Staff, Josh Bolten, to make sure there is no repetition of the habit the White House developed “after September 11” of abusing the chain of command—that is, the NSC dealing directly with the Chiefs and Combatant Commanders. It's not clear how this issue got resolved, but the memo implies that Rumsfeld won.

Rice doesn't seem to have responded to many of these suggestions, but she clearly did not appreciate the advice. Rumsfeld speculates that because her performance prior to 2000 had been seen as “above reproach,” she could not take “constructive criticism.” (p. 328-329). That seems a tad hypocritical [29].

* My next post will be about how Rumsfeld's critique of Rice's management applies to Iraq.

More by

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