

Donald Rumsfeld discusses defense, other topics in Naples

By BEN WOLFORD

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NAPLES — Donald Rumsfeld came to town, and Republicans flocked.

Dozens of them emerged from the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort on Wednesday afternoon with copies of the former defense secretary's new memoir. They gushed about his command of world affairs and endorsed his condemnation of the Obama administration's handling of defense and foreign policy.

"You could have heard a pin drop in there," Collier County Commissioner Donna Fiala said.

Rumsfeld, the U.S. Secretary of Defense under presidents Gerald Ford and George W. Bush, spoke at the \$150-per-ticket presentation put on by The Heritage Foundation, a major conservative think tank in Washington. Organizers would not allow the Daily News inside the event, but others said Rumsfeld covered a broad range of topics in the question-and-answer style talk, from entitlement programs to North Korea.

Along with Rumsfeld, The Heritage Foundation featured its president, Edwin J. Feulner, who has been a prominent conservative leader since the 1970s. Feulner bounced questions off Rumsfeld during an hour-and-a-half discussion.

"He's a neat person who's had a major impact on the history of our times," Feulner said.

The Heritage Foundation has hosted similar events in Naples, where Feulner says a loyal, receptive audience always awaits. Fox News show host Sean Hannity was the featured guest in March, and Bush adviser Karl Rove visited in 2010.

Wednesday, a line of guests waited to have Rumsfeld sign copies of his tell-all "Known and Unknown," released this year.

On military spending, which the White House has ordered drastically reduced, Feulner said Rumsfeld was critical.

Rumsfeld mentioned "how easy it is to visualize cuts in defense but how hard it is then for somebody in the future to be able to build from that lower base," Feulner said. "He talked about what he confronted both the first time he was Secretary of Defense and then 25 years later when he went back to that job. He's kind of a wake-up call that defense should not be sacrificed."

The stance resonated with Naples City Councilman Sam Saad. He had met Rumsfeld before when Saad was special assistant to the Solicitor of Labor in the Bush administration.

"There's a lack of focus on the strategic interests of the United States, and the idea that we are somehow better off is totally incorrect," Saad said.

Not everyone was completely enamored. Though they agree on many things, Bob Levy, head of another conservative policy center, the Cato Institute, has disagreed with The Heritage Foundation and Rumsfeld on foreign policy.

"I have great respect for what Heritage does. I'm very happy that they exist, but I don't see eye to eye with them on everything," Levy said. "We would opt for much less interventions on foreign policy than would the folks at Heritage ... a rejection of the notion that America has to project its empire globally."