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Fareed Zakaria

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The Price of Arrogance

In a war that could go on for decades, you cannot simply detain people indefinitely on the sole authority of the secretary of Defense

By Fareed Zakaria
Newsweek

May 17 issue - America is ushering in a new responsibility era," says President Bush as part of his standard stump speech, "where each of us understands we're responsible for the decisions we make in life." When speaking about bad CEOs he's even clearer as to what it entails: "You're beginning to see the consequences of people making irresponsible decisions. They need to pay a price for their irresponsibility."

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"I take full responsibility," said Donald Rumsfeld in his congressional testimony last week. But what does this mean? Secretary Rumsfeld hastened to add that he did not plan to resign and was not going to ask anyone else who might have been "responsible" to resign. As far as I can tell, taking responsibility these days means nothing more than saying the magic words "I take responsibility."

After the greatest terrorist attack against America, no one was asked to resign, and the White House didn't even want to launch a serious investigation into it. The 9/11 Commission was created after months of refusals because some of the victims' families pursued it aggressively and simply didn't give up. After the fiasco over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, not one person was even reassigned. The only people who have been fired or cashiered in this administration are men like Gen. Eric Shinseki, Paul O'Neill and Larry Lindsey, who spoke inconvenient truths.

Rumsfeld went on in his testimony to explain that "these terrible acts were perpetrated by a small number." That's correct, except the small number who are truly responsible are not the handful of uniformed personnel currently being charged for the prison abuse scandal. The events at Abu Ghraib are part of a larger breakdown in American policy over the past two years. And it has been perpetrated by a small number of people at the highest levels of government.

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to today's "set of facts." He and his top aides have tried persistently to keep prisoners out of the reach of either American courts or international law, presumably so that they can be handled without those pettifogging rules as barriers. Rumsfeld initially fought both the uniformed military and Colin Powell, who urged that prisoners in Guantanamo be accorded rights under the conventions. Eventually he gave in on the matter but continued to suggest that the protocols were antiquated. Last week he said again that the Geneva Conventions did not "precisely apply" and were simply basic rules.

The conventions are not exactly optional. They are the law of the land, signed by the

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president and ratified by Congress. Rumsfeld's concern—that Al Qaeda members do not wear uniforms and are thus "unlawful combatants"—is understandable, but that is a determination that a military court would have to make. In a war that could go on for decades, you cannot simply arrest and detain people indefinitely on the say-so of the secretary of Defense.

The basic attitude taken by Rumsfeld, Cheney and their top aides has been "We're at war; all these niceties will have to wait." As a result, we have waged pre-emptive war unilaterally, spurned international cooperation, rejected United Nations participation, humiliated allies, discounted the need for local support in Iraq and incurred massive costs in blood and treasure. If the world is not to be trusted in these dangerous times, key agencies of the American government, like the State Department, are to be trusted even less. Congress is barely informed, even on issues on which its "advise and consent" are constitutionally mandated.

Leave process aside: the results are plain. On almost every issue involving postwar Iraq—troop strength, international support, the credibility of exiles, de-Baathification, handling Ayatollah Ali Sistani—Washington's assumptions and policies have been wrong. By now most have been reversed, often too late to have much effect. This strange combination of arrogance and incompetence has not only destroyed the hopes for a new Iraq. It has had the much broader effect of turning the United States into an international outlaw in the eyes of much of the world.

Whether he wins or loses in November, George W. Bush's legacy is now clear: the creation of a poisonous atmosphere of anti-Americanism around the globe. I'm sure he takes full responsibility.

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Next →

Newsweek World News Section Front

- No Good Defense
- A Who's Who of the Accused
- Alter: The Picture the World Sees
- Abu Ghraib and Beyond
- Questions of Justice
- Zakaria: The Price of Arrogance
- Newsweek World News Section Front

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- Rumsfeld: No Good Defense
- A Dream Deferred
- An American Connection
- Street Fighting Man
- Rock's Big Bounce

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