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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Rumsfeld Should Stay

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

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WASHINGTON — Donald Rumsfeld has been designated by Democratic politicians as the scapegoat for the scandal at Abu Ghraib prison. But any resignation would only whet their appetite to cut and run. The highly effective defense secretary owes it to the nation's war on terror to soldier on.

Because today's column will generate apoplectic e-mail, a word about contrarian opinion: Shortly after 9/11, with the nation gripped by fear and fury, the Bush White House issued a sweeping and popular order to crack down on suspected terrorists. The liberal establishment largely fell cravenly mute. A few lonely civil libertarians spoke out. When I used the word "dictatorial," conservatives, both neo- and paleo-, derided my condemnation as "hysterical."

One Bush cabinet member paid attention. Rumsfeld appointed a bipartisan panel of attorneys to re-examine that draconian edict. As a result, basic protections for the accused Qaeda combatants were included in the proposed military tribunals.

Perhaps because of those protections, the tribunals never got off the ground. (The Supreme Court will soon, I hope, provide similar legal rights to suspected terrorists who are U.S. citizens.) But in the panic of the winter of 2001, Rumsfeld was one of the few in power concerned about prisoners' rights. Some now demanding his scalp then supported the repressive Patriot Act.

In last week's apology before the Senate, Rumsfeld assumed ultimate responsibility, as J.F.K. did after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. The Pentagon chief failed to foresee and warn the president of the danger lurking in the Army's public announcement in January of its criminal investigation into prisoner abuse. He failed to put the nation's reputation ahead of the regulation prohibiting "command influence" in criminal investigations, which protects the accused in courts-martial.

The secretary testified that he was, incredibly, the last to see the humiliating photos that turned a damning army critique by Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba into a media firestorm. Why nobody searched out and showed him those incendiary pictures immediately reveals sheer stupidity on the part of the command structure and his Pentagon staff.

But then Senator Mark Dayton of Minnesota rudely badgered the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Richard Myers, repeatedly hurling the word "suppression" at him. General Myers had been trying to save the lives of troops by persuading CBS to delay its broadcast of pictures that would inflame resistance. Rumsfeld quieted the sound-bite-hungry politician by reminding him that requests to delay life-threatening reports were part of long military-media tradition.

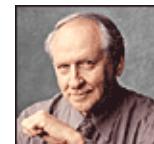
This was scandal with no cover-up; the wheels of investigation and prosecution were grinding, with public exposure certain. Second only to the failure to prevent torture was the Pentagon's failure to be first to break the bad news: the Taguba report should have been released at a Rumsfeld press conference months ago.

Now every suspect ever held in any U.S. facility will claim to have been tortured and demand recompense. Videos real and fake will stream across the world's screens, and propagandists abroad will join defeatists here in calling American prisons a "gulag," gleefully equating Bush not just with Saddam but with Stalin.

Torture is both unlawful and morally abhorrent. But what about gathering intelligence from suspected or proven terrorists

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by codified, regulated, manipulative interrogation? Information thus acquired can save thousands of lives. Will we now allow the pendulum to swing back to "name, rank, serial number," as if suspected terrorists planning the bombing of civilians were uniformed prisoners of war obeying the rules of war?

The United States shows the world its values by investigating and prosecuting wrongdoers high and low. It is not in our political value system to scapegoat a good man for the depraved acts of others. Nor does it make strategic sense to remove a war leader in the vain hope of appeasing critics of the war.

This secretary of defense, who has the strong support of the president, is both effective and symbolic. If he were to quit under political fire, pressure would mount for America to quit under insurgent fire. Hang in there, Rummy! You have a duty to serve in our "long, hard slog."

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