

# THE PASSION OF THE RUMSFELD

Congress stages an ordeal by rubber stamp

By Wayne Biddle

The annual Capitol Hill exercise of maneuvering a 775,000-square-foot rubber stamp onto the defense budget began on a frigid February morning when half of the neighborhood was shut down by *Ricinus communis*, a member of the spurge family of plants so called since the Middle Ages for their purgative powers. Oil from the castor bean has not been taken as a laxative by many Americans since the Little Rascals generation, but it still finds use as a commercial lubricant, one that the military-industrial complex might find very handy in this year of soaring national debt. With Senate office buildings along Constitution Avenue quarantined after the discovery of *Ricinus* powder in Majority Leader Bill Frist's mail, both armed-services committees were forced to convene across the Hill in 2118 Rayburn, one of the grandest House chambers. "I feel somewhat like a bishop," observed John Warner of Virginia, chairman of the Senate panel, from his high dais—precisely how he is regarded by generals, admirals, and sec-

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retaries of defense who appear before him to account for their disbursements of hundreds of billions of dollars.

Humans and horses are two of the animals most vulnerable to ricin—horses especially so, since they cannot vomit. The military has returned to

sake of rational discourse. What is undeniable is that the war seemed to come home that morning, which always helps unfold the national wallet.

Another war was coming home, too—still coming home, though the generation that survived its catastrophes is well into the age when memory becomes more of an organic problem than a political flashpoint. The activities of President Bush and contender John Kerry during the Vietnam era—as far distant now as the Spanish Civil War was then—attained at least the level of attention signified by newsweekly cover stories because the President regularly storyboards himself as military personnel and Kerry adorns himself with fiftyish veterans on the campaign trail. Few American leaders attain,

let alone keep, positions of national stature without demonstrating loyalty to the "monstrous exotic," as Walt Whitman called the armed services. The demeanor of the committee members in 2118 Rayburn, whose constitutional role is to act as stewards of the public purse, showed just how seamless this loyalty has become.

"We must remember that defense of our homeland begins on the dis-



dégoûtant levels of spending after a post-Soviet decade of relative moderation, driven by a war against terrorism even more amorphous than the Red menace that served so lucratively for fifty years. Whoever the nut was who sent that toxic letter had no idea what a perfect curtain-raiser it would be for the FY2005 defense bill. Unless he did, but we must put that fascinating possibility aside for the

tant battlefields of the world," intoned the theatrically courtly Warner, who was secretary of the Navy for twenty-three months during the second Nixon Administration while still married to Paul Mellon's daughter, Catherine. Their 1973 divorce delivered Atoka, a 550-acre estate in Fauquier County horse country, plus the millions to run it, which he used to entertain multitudes of Republican activists. In 1976 he entered a state of matrimony with Elizabeth Taylor, whose celebrity helped him win a close election to the Senate two years later. Although he has kept that seat ever since, his term as her seventh husband ended in 1982. Now seventy-seven, he appears focused on running the committee, even on the day last December of his third wedding, to the widow by suicide of longtime Republican hand Paul Vander Myde, an assistant secretary of commerce during the Reagan years.

"I'm encouraged by my initial review of the President's defense budget for the fiscal year 2005," he assured Donald Rumsfeld, who had brought along the Pentagon's top money man, comptroller Dov Zakheim, just in case anybody wasn't encouraged. "This request of \$401.7 billion for the department represents a 5 percent increase over the FY04 authorized level and the fourth straight year of growth for the defense budget. This sends a strong signal to the world of America's commitment to freedom. And the President and you, Mr. Secretary, deserve special recognition because we know the competitive forces on our budget today." That is, the Department of Defense was the only federal agency to receive a significant raise other than Homeland Security.

After a brief statement by the panel's senior Democrat, Carl Levin of Michigan, pointing out that the budget was at least \$50 billion short because it contained no funds for keeping troops in Iraq or Afghanistan, and that a presidential "stop-loss" order involuntarily extending soldiers' enlistment had been necessary to keep sufficient numbers of them there at all, Rumsfeld had his go.

First, he gratefully acknowledged that \$401.7 billion represented "an enormous amount of taxpayers' hard-earned money" but insisted, like the Cold Warrior he used to be, that "such investments will likely be required for a number of years to come, because our nation is engaged in a struggle that could well go on for a number of years." He then turned to a subject of some current contention:

During my confirmation hearing... I was asked what would keep me up at night. And I answered, "intelligence." I said that because the challenge facing the intelligence community today is truly difficult. Their task is to penetrate closed societies—and you [to staff] might want to put that picture of a closed society up—and organizations and try and learn things our adversaries don't want them to know. That's the Korean peninsula. The DMZ is the line in the middle. South Korea—the same people as in North Korea—has got light. This is a satellite photo. It has light and energy and opportunity and a vibrant democratic system. North Korea is a dark, dark country.

With this image firmly in the minds of the peering committee members, he went on to lament the "impression that has and is being created of broad intelligence failures," that "intelligence will never be perfect," and that "we do not, will not, and cannot know everything that's going on in this world of ours."

Chairman Warner then commended him for his "very strong and informative and forthright statement."

The secretary was not quite off the hook, but essentially so. Levin sought clarification on how he could have stated publicly in September 2002 that Iraq had "amassed large clandestine stockpiles of chemical weapons" when the Defense Intelligence Agency produced a secret study that same month saying, "There is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons." To which Rumsfeld replied, "I'm sure I never saw that piece of intelligence."

The rest of the session consisted of light sparring with Democratic

members such as Ted Kennedy and Hillary Clinton over the intelligence thing and the \$50 billion shortsheeting. On the latter, Rumsfeld claimed, with Dov Zakheim's support, that wars have always been funded by supplemental requests. This was an untruth. But that Zakheim, who would resign in March, had called it a "pathological system" at his first press conference as comptroller in May 2001 was not placed in the congressional record. Republican members mostly used their time to assuage perceived insults from across the aisle, except for Arizona senator John McCain, who predicted a "very large exodus" from the National Guard now that 40 percent of the troops in Iraq were being drawn from such units. Demonstrating why the White House treats him so warily, he also sharply questioned why "many members of the Defense Policy [Board] and [Defense] Science Board were lobbying DOD and Air Force officials to approve the lease of a hundred Boeing 767" tankers, calling this an "incestuous relationship." Warner then adjourned the hearing in time for lunch.

When the House Armed Services Committee gathered that afternoon in its home chamber, Chairman Duncan Hunter, a former Army Ranger who represents part of San Diego County, greeted Rumsfeld with the hope that he had not "grown weary of the Rayburn Building yet" and noted his "crunch for time." Like Senator Warner, he complimented the secretary for making "a sound attempt to balance the urgent needs of the theaters of war with long-term requirements," though no one had penciled in the missing \$50 billion during lunchtime. The budget was "a good package—one of the few budgets that has been presented that is an increase," which he somehow pegged at 7 percent instead of Warner's 5 percent. The senior Democrat, Ike Skelton, then applauded the increase, too, but said the Army deserved more.

Rumsfeld repeated his morning

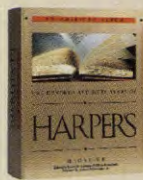
performance, complete with photo of dark, dark North Korea. Questions from House members tend to be more parochial than those from senators, concentrating on the fullness of the local pork barrel. The testimony produced few zingers, other than nitpicking matters such as that when the Iraq war began just 1,600 sets of body armor were being produced per month for several hundred thousand troops, so that only as of January 2004 did all personnel in the combat theater have realistically protective flak jackets to wear. Likewise, of some 11,000 Humvee jeeps, only about 500 were armored at the beginning of combat, and the current total is still just 2,000.

"Somebody's going to die because the door . . . of the Humvee is no better than my CJ-7, which is in glass and canvas," ventured Rob Simmons, a Republican from SUV-obsessed Connecticut, albeit using the wrong verb tense—many soldiers have already been killed or maimed in these vehicles. The subject was dropped, however, and just why an army that spends upwards of \$100 billion a year was caught flat-footed on an issue as conventional as armor, going into battle with dumb-cluck gear, remains unknown.

When Loretta Sanchez, a California Democrat, tried to press Rumsfeld on WMD intelligence and the missing operational funds for Iraq and Afghanistan, she was cut short by Hunter, while Rumsfeld laughingly suggested they have lunch.

Hunter eventually brought the afternoon to a climax with a short speech about how "the revelations that we've seen—the film of people being pushed off buildings, people being executed, the hundreds, now, of mass graves that are being turned up in Iraq—all say one thing and that is that what we did was right and that the moral purpose of the people wearing the uniform of the United States was right and that this debate that is now taking place over whether or not our intelligence was perfectly accurate does not go to that point—that we have undertaken and are finishing an enormous task for humanity."

"Mr. Chairman, I must say, I agree



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SOLUTION TO THE APRIL PUZZLE

NOTES FOR "CROSS-WORDS":

Unclued answers are BRIDGES. Famous: LONDON, GOLDEN GATE, BROOKLYN, SAN LUIS REY, PONTE VECCHIO, and also LLOYD, BEAU, and JEFF; types of: TRESTLE, SUSPENSION, COVERED; and, of course, CONTRACT and AUCTION.

Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov.  
Anagrams are indicated with an asterisk (\*).

ACROSS: 1. \*; 8. a-but; 9. \*; 12. resum(Mon.)ed; 14. hidden; 16. palindrome; 17. hidden; 18. \*; 19. ju(do-is)t; 21. sat(rev.)-mania; 24. fl.-ounce; 25. b(r-1)ars; 26. fa-(got)-ti; 32. ago-G; 35. th(e-democr)at; 37. lo-cal; 39. \*; 41. two mngs.; 42. fl(zoo-rev.)ie; 43. \*; 44. mor(so-rev.)e.

DOWN: 1. ha(RP-is)t; 2. I(n)-MMIX; 3. lamb(s)kin(s); 4. \*; 5. o(d)d(n)e(s)s; 6. n(O)D.; 7. R-oar; 10. selo(m)\*; 11. road-h\*-go(rev.); 13. hidden; 15. \*; 20. qu(O)it; 22. man-D.A.-Tory; 23. in-Va.-in; 25. bel(lyf\*)u\*-L; 27. inter-nee; 28. reversal; 29. en-suing; 30. Harpo-on; 31. P-arty; 33. glo(b)al\*; 34. g(e)nome; 36. hall-O-a; 38. I(A-Z)ed; 40. To(Ron)to.

H	O	S	T	I	L	E	C	O	N	T	R	A	C	T
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B	R	I	A	R	S	N	D	F	A	G	O	T	T	I
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Y	L	T	T	A	U	N	O	E	N	P	E	L	T	R
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completely with what you've said," Rumsfeld replied.

"We invite you back here anytime, Mr. Secretary."

"I hope you will."

And there ended the day's congressional oversight.

**A** week later, Rumsfeld returned to the Hill at the invitation of the House Appropriations Committee's defense subpanel. Since the turbulent presidency of Andrew Jackson in the 1830s, when Congress was wracked by party rifts and the tactic of larding budget bills with political riders became dysfunctional, the process of authorizing government spending has been on a separate legislative track from actually ordering cash to flow from the Treasury. Although the two armed-services committees have acquired a well-deserved reputation for cheerleading as authorizers of the military budget—their office décor is more *Kriegsakademie* than the Pentagon's—the integrity of the system is supposed to be stiffened by having other groups, the appropriations committees, pass expenditures on a line-by-line basis. But the appropriators are today just as patriotically proud as the authorizers of their ability to hand out staggering sums of money. Representative Jerry Lewis, a California life-insurance salesman from San Bernardino County who chairs the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, greeted Rumsfeld by promising to protect him from pressures elsewhere in Congress "targeting our budget" (which he described as "just a slight smidge beyond \$400 billion") and to make sure it was "not eroded by other wish lists."

Although one Democrat, David Obey of Wisconsin, had the gall to tell the secretary that "this budget is no more a budget than a chorus of kazooos is the Marine Band," because it contained nothing for the war, Rumsfeld was left free to make use of his same dark, dark North Korea script from the week before. There were then a few more queries about thin-skinned Humvees. ("We had a threat situation in Iraq that was changing," offered General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who

accompanied Rumsfeld; new "up-armored" models would now "protect our folks, keep from meeting them here at Walter Reed or worse.") But the atmosphere remained loose enough for David Hobson, Republican from Ohio, to inquire about an "order" he had heard of on a recent fact-finding tour of Iraq that no more Burger Kings or Taco Bells would be built for the troops "because there's a big contractor complaining that the kids aren't eating in the chow hall." The name Halliburton was not uttered, and the query went unanswered.

Taking up the rear of the line of interrogators was Jim Moran, a seven-term Democrat who represents the northern Virginia district containing the Pentagon. He has been in somewhat bad odor even within his own party since observing at a March 2003 antiwar rally in suburban Reston that "if it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war with Iraq, we would not be doing this." He duly apologized, and has tried to move on as best he can. "Mr. Secretary, I'm sorry that your last questioner could not be treating you in the kind of warm and fuzzy manner that you prefer," he began. He then charged that the \$10 billion earmarked for fighting global terrorism in FY2003 that Congress had refused to authorize—an action Rumsfeld regularly cites as justification for seeking Iraq money through supplementals—was a "slush fund," not a properly defined estimate, and therefore rightly denied. "The service chiefs all said within the last week that they were going to run bone dry of money by the end of June," he continued. "To wait until after the presidential elections [to submit a supplemental request] is blatantly playing politics in everyone's perspective. And I think that discredits the budget office of the Department of Defense and the Congress's role itself."

Mr. Moran had some more points to make, but Chairman Lewis admonished him to "move right along, sir," and within minutes gaveled the hearing to an end.

**I**t might be of interest that the 2005 defense bill contains \$341 mil-

lion for work on the B-2 Stealth bomber, which was developed twenty years ago to drop H-bombs on Moscow; \$4.7 billion for the next-generation F-22 "Raptor" jet fighter, which will enhance the superiority of American warplanes in skies where they have not been challenged in the least bit by any existing or potential rival for a generation; \$1.75 billion for the V-22 "Osprey" tilt-rotor aircraft that has slaughtered its test crews for decades; \$2.6 billion for the new Virginia-class attack submarine that has no foe whatsoever; and \$10.2 billion for "Star Wars" anti-missile defense that, well, requires no reason at all by now. These programs alone total nearly \$20 billion, about the level of Harvard University's endowment and greater than the GNP of most nations. There will be little or nothing said about these programs as the budget wends its way through Congress for enactment next fall.

Far more demanding of the electorate's attention will be whether President Bush goofed his way through the Air National Guard rather than go to Southeast Asia, which would have been a no-brainer for any young man outside the patriotic-doofer category, to use a popular old phrase from those days. Or whether John Kerry realized what a turkey asshole, likewise, he had been by going, and then tried to keep others from making the same mistake. These are the terms that can still bring men to fistcuffs in stinky barrooms across the land any night of the week. They are just like why the previous generation still cannot bear to mention Japanese civilians when the *Enola Gay* is put on display and why the generation before that could not stand to talk about what greeted the green farmboy recruits sent to France in 1918. They are why nature intended that old soldiers should fade away along with whoever supported or opposed them. And they are why members of Congress would apparently rather do almost anything this year than take a hard look at that \$401.7 billion of taxpayers' hard-earned money. ■