

Daily News Thursday, November 9, 2006



War room bombshell saves W

BY THOMAS M. DEFRANK
DAILY NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

WASHINGTON — George W. Bush may be stubborn. He's not stupid.

By swiftly throwing his secretary of defense under the bus, President Bush did far more than change the subject from Tuesday's stinging electoral repudiation. He saved his weakened presidency from its greatest peril: irrelevancy.

Leaving Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon would have signaled victorious Democrats that Bush wasn't really interested in reassessing an Iraq policy that two thirds of the country rejects.

In Richard Nixon's immortal phrase, Bush risked turning himself into a pitiful, helpless giant in the twilight of his tenure by digging in his cowboy boots. He would have vaporized his credibility at the outset of what promises to be a difficult two-year struggle against emboldened Democrats and the lame-duck calendar.

Having waged — and lost — his last election, Bush was liberated to render inoperative three years of fervently de-

ANALYSIS

fending his lightning-rod defense secretary.

"The reality of the situation is that Iraq is a huge political liability and Rumsfeld is the symbol of the war," a longtime presidential confidant told the Daily News. "Bush understands the policy has to change, and you can't change the policy and keep the architect."

Jettisoning Rumsfeld was Bush's idea, not Rummy's. In fact, Rumsfeld has been on borrowed time for well over a year. In moments of quiet candor, Bush has vented to family members and other confidants that much of the advice he got from Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney about how Iraq would play out after the successful 2003 invasion was wrong.

Tapping former Secretary of State James Baker to head an Iraq study panel was another sign the commander in chief was growing restless.

Bush has been contemplating Rumsfeld's departure scenario since last summer, sources told The News. But pull-

ing the trigger before the election would have infuriated his conservative base, costing him more seats. It also would have acknowledged his Iraq policy was deeply flawed, something Bush couldn't risk admitting until after the midterms.

"How long do you give Rummy?" a prominent member of the first President George Bush's inner circle asked a reporter last month, flashing a thumbs-down gesture.

For the last six years, Bush and his staff have infuriated even Republican allies with their hard-to-be-humble routine. Now, in a single dramatic flourish, he has demonstrated he's more flexible and pragmatic than his critics prefer to believe.

The appointment of former CIA Director Bob Gates, like Baker one of his father's closest confidants, also obliterates the myth the two Presidents Bush never discuss shop.

"Anybody who thinks Bush doesn't talk to his father and Jim Baker about Iraq needs to explain to me how Bob Gates got the job," a senior GOP strategist said.

tom@nydailynews.com

p. 2

AFP PHOTO/TIM SLOAN

President Bush discusses firing of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (l.) and introduces intended replacement Robert Gates (r).