

Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld dies at 88

By Robert Burns / National Security Writer

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WASHINGTON — Donald Rumsfeld, the two-time defense secretary and one-time presidential candidate whose reputation as a skilled bureaucrat and visionary of a modern U.S. military was unraveled by the long and costly Iraq war, died Tuesday. He was 88.

In a statement Wednesday, Rumsfeld's family said he "was surrounded by family in his beloved Taos, New Mexico."

President George W. Bush, under whom Rumsfeld served as Pentagon chief, hailed his "steady service as a wartime secretary of defense — a duty he carried out with strength, skill, and honor."

Regarded by former colleagues as equally smart and combative, patriotic and politically cunning, Rumsfeld had a storied career in government under four presidents and nearly a quarter century in corporate America.

After retiring in 2008 he headed the Rumsfeld Foundation to promote public service and to work with charities that provide services and support for military families and wounded veterans.

"Rummy," as he was often called, was ambitious, witty, energetic, engaging and capable of great personal warmth. But he irritated many with his confrontational style. An accomplished wrestler in college, Rumsfeld relished verbal sparring and elevated it to an art form; a biting humor was a favorite weapon.

Still, he built a network of loyalists who admired his work ethic, intelligence and impatience with all who failed to share his sense of urgency.

Rumsfeld is the only person to serve twice as Pentagon chief. The first time, in 1975-77, he was the youngest ever. The next time, in 2001-06, he was the oldest.

Current Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin saluted Rumsfeld on Wednesday for his "boundless energy, probing intellect, and abiding commitment to serve his country."

He made a brief run for the 1988 Republican presidential nomination, a spectacular flop that he once described as humbling for a man used to success at the highest levels of the government, including stints as White House chief of staff, U.S. ambassador and member of Congress.

For all Rumsfeld's achievements, it was the setbacks in Iraq in the twilight of his career that will likely etch the most vivid features of his legacy.

Nine months into his second tour as defense secretary, on Sept. 11, 2001, suicide hijackers attacked the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, thrusting the nation into wars for which the military was ill-prepared. Rumsfeld oversaw the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and toppling of the Taliban regime. Frequently presiding at televised briefings on the war, Rumsfeld became something of a TV star, applauded for his blunt talk and uncompromising style.

By 2002 the Bush administration's attention shifted to Iraq, which played no role in the Sept. 11 attacks. The war effort in Afghanistan took a back seat to Iraq, opening the way for the Taliban to make a comeback and prevent the U.S. from sealing the success of its initial invasion.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was launched in March 2003. Baghdad fell quickly, but U.S. and allied forces soon became consumed with a violent insurgency. Critics faulted Rumsfeld for dismissing the pre-invasion assessment of the Army's top general, Eric Shinseki, that several hundred thousand allied troops would be needed to stabilize Iraq.

News of Rumsfeld's death broke overnight in Iraq, where the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein and disbanding of Iraqi security forces ushered in years of unremitting sectarian killings and car bombs at the hands of rival armed factions.

"It deprived us of an ordinary life," said Rasha Al Aqeedi, now a U.S.-based analyst from the Iraqi city of Mosul. Daily "curfews, an explosion here, a suicide attack there. A consistent sight of death everywhere."

Al Aqeedi joined other Arabs Wednesday in tweeting of Rumsfeld's blame in the invasion. By phone, she cited his and other Bush officials' apparent lack of planning for what happened after the U.S. toppled Saddam.

"The legacy he left behind ... the Iraq war, has been such a stain on Americans' foreign policy," she said. "It shaped how an entire generation views any intervention" by the United States.

Rumsfeld twice offered his resignation to Bush in 2004 amid disclosures that U.S. troops had abused detainees at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison — an episode he later referred to as his darkest hour as defense secretary.

Not until November 2006, after Democrats gained control of Congress by riding a wave of antiwar sentiment, did Bush finally decide Rumsfeld had to go. He left office in December, replaced by Robert Gates.

Rumsfeld is survived by his wife, Joyce, three children and seven grandchildren.

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Associated Press writer Ellen Knickmeyer in Oklahoma City contributed to this report.