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At Army Base, Officers Are Split Over War

By [ELISABETH BUMILLER](#)

FORT LEAVENWORTH, Kan. — Here in this Western outpost that serves as the intellectual center of the United States Army, two elite officers were deep in debate at lunch on a recent day over who bore more responsibility for mistakes in Iraq — the former defense secretary, [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#), or the generals who acquiesced to him.

“The secretary of defense is an easy target,” argued one of the officers, Maj. Kareem P. Montague, 34, a Harvard graduate and a commander in the Third Infantry Division that was the first to reach Baghdad in the 2003 invasion. “It’s easy to pick on the political appointee.”

“But he’s the one that’s responsible,” retorted Maj. Michael J. Zinno, 40, a military planner who worked at the headquarters of the Coalitional Provisional Authority, the former American civilian administration in Iraq.

No, Major Montague shot back, it was more complicated: the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#) and the top commanders were part of the decision to send in a small invasion force and not enough troops for the occupation. Only Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, the Army chief of staff who was sidelined after he told Congress that it would take several hundred thousand troops in Iraq, spoke up in public.

“You didn’t hear any of them at the time, other than General Shinseki, screaming, saying that this was untenable,” Major Montague said.

As the war grinds through its fifth year, Fort Leavenworth has become a front line in the military’s tension and soul-searching over Iraq. Here on the bluffs above the Missouri River rising young officers are on a different kind of journey — an outspoken re-examination of their role in Iraq.

Discussions between a New York Times reporter and dozens of young majors in five Leavenworth classrooms over two days — all unusual for their frankness in an Army that has traditionally presented a facade of solidarity to the outside world — showed a divide in opinion. Officers were split over whether Mr. Rumsfeld, the military leaders or both deserved blame for what they said were the major errors in the war: sending in a small invasion force and failing to plan properly for the occupation.

But the consensus was that not even after Vietnam was the Army’s internal criticism as harsh or the second-guessing so painful, and that airing the arguments on the record, as sanctioned by Leavenworth’s senior commanders, was part of a concerted effort to force change.

“You spend your whole career worrying about the safety of soldiers — let’s do the training right so no one gets injured, let’s make sure no one gets killed, and then you deploy and you’re attending memorial services for

19-year-olds,” said Maj. Niave Knell, 37, who worked in Baghdad to set up an Iraqi highway patrol. “And you have to think about what you did.”

On one level, second-guessing is institutionalized at Leavenworth, home to the Combined Arms Center, a sprawling Army research center that includes the Command and General Staff College for midcareer officers, the School of Advanced Military Studies for the most elite and the Center for Army Lessons Learned, which collects and disseminates battlefield data. (The center publishes a handbook for soldiers with strategies to help keep them alive for their first 100 days in combat, a response to the high percentage who died in their early months in Iraq.)

At Leavenworth, officers study [Napoleon's](#) battle plans and Lt. William Calley's mistakes in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. Last year Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), now the top American commander in Iraq, wrote the Army and Marine Corps' new Counterinsurgency Field Manual there. The goal at Leavenworth is to adapt the Army to the changing battlefield without repeating the mistakes of the past.

But senior officers say that much of the professional second-guessing has become an emotional exercise for young officers. “Many of them have been affected by people they know who died over there,” said Maj. Gen. William B. Caldwell IV, the Leavenworth commander and the former top spokesman for the American military in Iraq. Unlike the 1991 Persian Gulf war and the conflicts in the Balkans and even Somalia, General Caldwell said, “we just never experienced the loss of life like we have here. And when that happens, it becomes very personal. You want to believe that there's no question your cause is just and that it has the potential to succeed.”

Much of the debate at the school has centered on a scathing article, “A Failure in Generalship,” written last May for Armed Forces Journal by Lt. Col. Paul Yingling, an Iraq veteran and deputy commander of the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment who holds a master's degree in political science from the [University of Chicago](#). “If the general remains silent while the statesman commits a nation to war with insufficient means, he shares culpability for the results,” Colonel Yingling wrote.

The article has been required class reading at Leavenworth, where young officers debate whether Colonel Yingling was right to question senior commanders who sent junior officers into battle with so few troops.

“Where I was standing on the street corner, at the 14th of July Bridge, yeah, another brigade there would have been great,” said Maj. Jeffrey H. Powell, 37, a company commander who was referring to the bridge in Baghdad he helped secure during the early days of the war.

Major Powell, who was speaking in a class at the School for Advanced Military Studies, has read many of the Iraq books describing the private disagreements over troop levels between Mr. Rumsfeld and the top commanders, who worried that the numbers were too low but went along in the end.

“Sure, I'm a human being, I question the decision-making process,” Major Powell said. Nonetheless, he said, “we don't get to sit on the top of the turrets of our tanks and complain that nobody planned for this. Our job is to fix it.”

Discussions nonetheless focused on where young officers might draw a “red line,” the point at which they

would defy a command from the civilians — the president and the defense secretary — who lead the military.

“We have an obligation that if our civilian leaders give us an order, unless it is illegal, immoral or unethical, then we’re supposed to execute it, and to not do so would be considered insubordinate,” said Major Timothy Jacobsen, another student. “How do you define what is truly illegal, immoral or unethical? At what point do you cross that threshold where this is no longer right, I need to raise my hand or resign or go to the media?” General Caldwell, who was the top military aide from 2002 to 2004 to the deputy defense secretary at the time, [Paul Wolfowitz](#), an architect of the Iraq war, would not talk about the meetings he had with Mr. Wolfowitz about the battle plans at the time. “We did have those discussions, and he would engage me on different things, but I’d feel very uncomfortable talking,” General Caldwell said.

Col. Gregory Fontenot, a Leavenworth instructor, said it was typical of young officers to feel that the senior commanders had not spoken up for their interests, and that he had felt the same way when he was their age. But Colonel Fontenot, who commanded a battalion in the Persian Gulf war and a brigade in Bosnia and has since retired, said he questioned whether Americans really wanted a four-star general to stand up publicly and say no to the president in a nation where civilians control the armed forces.

For the sake of argument, a question from the reporter was posed: If enough four-star generals had done that, would it have stopped the war?

“Yeah, we’d call it a coup d’etat,” Colonel Fontenot said. “Do you want to have a coup d’etat? You kind of have to decide what you want. Do you like the Constitution, or are you so upset about the Iraq war that you’re willing to dismiss the Constitution in just this one instance and hopefully things will be O.K.? I don’t think so.”

Some of the young officers were unimpressed by retired officers who spoke up against Mr. Rumsfeld in April 2006. The retired generals had little to lose, they argued, and their words would have mattered more had they been on active duty. “Why didn’t you do that while you were still in uniform?” Maj. James Hardaway, 36, asked.

On the other hand, Major Hardaway said, General Shinseki had shown there was a great cost, at least under Mr. Rumsfeld. “Evidence shows that when you do do that in uniform, bad things can happen,” he said. “So, it’s sort of a dichotomy of, should I do the right thing, even if I get punished?”

Another major said that young officers were engaged in their own revisionist history, and that many had believed the war could be won with Mr. Rumsfeld’s initial invasion force of about 170,000. “Everybody now claims, oh, I knew we were going to be there for five years and it was going to take 400,000 people,” said Maj. Patrick Proctor, 36. “Nobody wants to be the guy who said, ‘Yeah, I thought we could do it.’ But a lot of us did.”

One question that silenced many of the officers was a simple one: Should the war have been fought?

“I honestly don’t know how I feel about that,” Major Powell said in a telephone conversation last week after the discussions at Leavenworth.

“That’s a big, open question,” General Caldwell said after a long pause.

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