

Gen. Shinseki Retires, Hits Rumsfeld's Leadership Failure

by Edward Spannaus

The highly respected U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Eric Shinseki, retired from the Army on June 11, after 38 years of service. He had entered the Army as an enlisted man, and after losing part of one foot in the Vietnam War, and had to fight to remain in the Army, rising to its highest position.

In his farewell speech, delivered in front of a large, appreciative gathering of military and civilian officials, Shinseki made some very pointed comments about leadership and the military, which were widely interpreted as directed at the current Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, who had treated Shinseki contemptuously, in a very public manner.

Indeed, notable for their absence from Shinseki's retirement ceremony were Rumsfeld and his top civilian aides. "It was the ultimate snub," one attendee said.

Rumsfeld's reputation for abuse of the uniformed leadership is so bad that it has been reported that no fewer than seven top Army generals turned down offers to become Shinseki's replacement.

Command vs. Leadership

"My name is Shinseki, and I am a soldier," the General began, with what is described as characteristic humility. He praised his predecessors, who, he said, "understood the important distinction between command and effective leadership," identifying "command" as being "about authority, about an appointment to position—a set of orders granting title."

"Effective leadership is different. It must be learned and practiced in order for it to rise to the level of art. It has to do with values internalized and the willingness to sacrifice or subordinate all other concerns—advancement, personal well-being, safety—for others. So those men of iron invested tremendous time, energy, and intellect in leader development to ensure that those who are privileged to be selected for command, approach their duties with a sense of reverence, trust, and the willingness to sacrifice all, if necessary, for those they lead. You must love those you lead before you can be an effective leader. You can certainly command without that sense of commitment, but you cannot lead without

it; and without leadership, command is a hollow experience—a vacuum often filled with mistrust and arrogance."

Since "arrogance" is almost Rumsfeld's middle name, the implications were clear, as Shinseki continued: "Our mentors understood that mistrust and arrogance are antithetical to inspired and inspiring leadership—breeding discontent, fostering malcontents, and confusing intent within the force."

Shinseki discussed at length the principle of civilian leadership—a principle which Rumsfeld and his top deputy Paul Wolfowitz have accused the Army's uniformed leadership of ignoring. Shinseki pointedly cited a prime example, Secretary of the Army Thomas White—who was fired by Rumsfeld after White refused to denounce Shinseki's pre-war warning of the need for several hundred thousand troops to occupy post-war Iraq.

"So when some suggest that we, in the Army, don't understand the importance of civilian control of the military—well, that's just not helpful—and it isn't true. The Army has always understood the primacy of civilian control—we reinforce that principle to those with whom we train all around the world. So to muddy the waters when important issues are at stake, issues of life and death, is a disservice to all of those in and out of uniform who serve and lead so well."

Shinseki also warned against cutting the Army's strength, saying, "Beware the 12-division strategy for a 10-division Army," and he made a clear reference to the civilians whose ill-conceived war plans almost led to disaster for U.S. troops in Iraq: "Our nation has seen war too many times to believe that victory on the battlefield is due primarily to the brilliance of a plan—as opposed to leadership, tactical and technical proficiency, sheer grit and determination of the men and women who do the fighting and the bleeding."



Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric K. Shinseki (right) with Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White, in July 2002. Both took a principled position against Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's utopian military posture in Iraq; Shinseki was treated shabbily by Rumsfeld, and White was fired. Their views find a strong resonance among the uniformed military.