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THE CONFLICT IN IRAQ

Rumsfeld Hasn't Hit a Dead End in Forging Terms for Foe in Iraq

The defense chief's lexicon on the topic keeps changing. Now 'insurgents' is out.

By Paul Richter
Times Staff Writer

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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon's long struggle over how to describe the war in Iraq moved to new ground Tuesday as Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said he wanted to retire the term "insurgents" in favor of "enemies of the legitimate Iraqi government."

Rumsfeld, who has previously described the foe as "deadenders," "former regime elements" and in other terms, told a Pentagon news conference that the insurgent label lent the enemy "more legitimacy than they seem to merit." Iraqis now have a constitutional government that offers them legitimate means of political expression, and the foe lacks broad popular support, Rumsfeld argued.

"These people don't have a legitimate gripe," he said. "These people aren't trying to promote something other than disorder.... This is a group of people who don't merit the word 'insurgency.'"

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, an insurgent is "a person who revolts against civil authority or an established government."

This isn't the first time the Pentagon has tried to retire such a term.

Immediately after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, American military commanders referred to non-uniformed attackers as the "Saddam Fedayeen," and then "regime death squads."

After the military declared an end to initial major combat operations in spring 2003, Rumsfeld began calling them "dead-enders" and "former regime loyalists." When it was pointed out that the word "loyalists" might have too positive a connotation, the military began calling them "former regime elements."

But some objected that the acronym — "FRE" — sounded too much like "free." "Rebels" was also rejected early on as having a neutral, or even slightly positive, connotation.

Separately, a battle broke out this summer at the highest levels of the Bush administration over what to call the larger fight against terrorism.

Rumsfeld and White House national security advisor Stephen Hadley favored changing the name from the "global war on terrorism" (G-WOT) to the "global struggle against violent extremism" (G-SAVE). They contended that the latter name was more accurate because it suggested that the struggle was not exclusively a military matter.

But after an outcry from some conservative commentators, President Bush firmly rejected G-SAVE in favor of retaining G-WOT.

The effort to shift the lexicon is generating confusion among members of the public and military.

Marine Gen. Peter Pace, appearing on the podium with Rumsfeld on Tuesday, slipped and used the term "insurgents" before catching himself in front of his boss.

"I have to use the word 'insurgent' because I can't think of a better word right now," said Pace, who is chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Later, Pace acknowledged abashedly, "I'm sure I'll make a mistake and slip back into it."

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