Rumsfeld's much-vaunted 'courage' was a smokescreen for lies, crime and death

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It is customary, at times like these, to gloss over the failures and foibles of recently deceased officials: to paint a portrait in broad brush strokes about their achievements and qualities and public service.

In the case of the newly departed Donald Rumsfeld, the defense secretary who led the catastrophic war in Iraq, this would be a monumental dereliction of duty. And the old war criminal was a stickler for duty.

So let's cast aside the nuanced but respectful formulations of the Washington Post ("one of history's most consequential as well as controversial Pentagon leaders") and the New York Times ("a combative infighter who seemed to relish conflicts").

Somehow those quibbles didn't make it into the overwrought words of Rumsfeld's former boss and enabler, President George W Bush, who praised his "steady service as a wartime secretary of defense – a duty he carried out with strength, skill and honor".

"We mourn an exemplary public servant and a very good man," he added.

Donald Rumsfeld was not a very good man. He was the polar opposite, even on his own terms.

One of his famously pithy Rumsfeld rules, collected over a career of power in government and business, included this advice for people in the White House: "Remember the public trust. Strive to preserve and enhance the integrity of the office of the Presidency. Pledge to leave it stronger than when you came."

By Rumsfeld's own standards, he failed. He destroyed the public trust, the integrity of the presidency, and left America's reputation far weaker than when he came.

How did he do all that in the fevered five years between the 9/11 attacks of 2001 and his resignation in 2006?

We could start with his disastrous decision to turn away from the hunt from Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan to pursue Saddam Hussein in Iraq: one of the most baffling, harebrained and ultimately bloody choices in the history of American national security.

We now know that Rumsfeld was contemplating this bizarre plan within days, if not hours, of the attacks. He pursued an illegal aggressive war with no link to al-Qaida but with all the dogged skills he had learned from a career inside Washington, concocting a case for war that destroyed international trust and the integrity of anyone who touched it.

He wasn't the only one, for sure, and the buck stops with President Bush himself. But he was central to the cabal, alongside his old friend Dick Cheney, who dragged the United States and its allies – especially the UK – into an entirely avoidable quagmire that left tens and probably hundreds of thousands dead and maimed.

We are still living with the catastrophic consequences of Rumsfeld and his gang. There's a direct line from the Iraq invasion to Syria's civil war, along with the immense suffering of millions of civilians, and the political strain and instability caused by so many refugees to this day.

It's not as if this chain of events was unimaginable at the time.

Rumsfeld himself was just about smart enough to flick at the lid of the Pandora's box he was about to detonate. In one of his classically cryptic memos to his inner circle of warmongers in late 2001, Rumsfeld casually raised an eyebrow over the chaos he was unleashing on the world.

"We ought to think through what are the bad things that could happen, and what are the good things that can happen that we need to be ready for in both respects. Please give me a list of each," he wrote. "Thanks."

Rumsfeld might have been talking about Afghanistan, where Kabul was about to fall and Bin Laden was ready to run for the mountains at Tora Bora. Or he might have been talking about Iraq, where Rumsfeld was already planning his war. Either way,

he botched them both by failing to give a damn about the messy business of rebuilding nations after war.

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Nation-building was scorned by Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney and the gang because it was all so soft and cuddly and liberal. You don't have to be a professor at the National War College to realize that macho ignorance might just be why their record in Afghanistan and Iraq was so utterly disastrous after the initial, apparently successful, military action. We are now exiting Afghanistan after two decades of failure rooted in Rumsfeld's original plans.

It was this mixture of extreme arrogance and incompetence, along with a cavalier disregard for human suffering and integrity, that was the hallmark of Rumsfeld's short and bloody reign. His policy chief, Doug Feith, bragged about how going to Baghdad was just a milestone on the road to Tehran.

But when Iraq fell apart, their hawkish allies in the White House turned on Rumsfeld's team for failing to have any kind of credible plan to run a country ravaged by decades of sanctions, airstrikes and corrupt government.

Rumsfeld did have a credible plan for torture, however. It's not the stuff of polite conversation or political debate to concede that the charismatic and quippy Washington man was, in fact, entirely comfortable with torture. But he was very comfortable with it, and couldn't understand why anyone could feel any different.

When his team wrote up detailed torture plans for prisoners at Guantánamo Bay – including being forced to stand for hours on end – Rumsfeld made it clear they weren't being tough enough. "I stand for eight to 10 hours a day," he scribbled on one memo authorizing torture in 2002. "Why is standing limited to four hours?"

When he wasn't mimicking Jack Nicholson in A Few Good Men, Rumsfeld was blaming everyone else for a few war crimes here and there. It was Rumsfeld who presided over the grotesque abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. At the time, he offered to resign and expressed some regret, but mostly argued that he was very busy, the war was quite a big undertaking, and that bad stuff happens in prisons.

Far from growing more reflective or responsible after leaving office, Rumsfeld regretted nothing, apologized for nothing and learned nothing. In his 2011 book, he claimed that the Abu Ghraib photos were the result of "a small group of prison guards who ran amok", and that the whole torture thing was just some political hot air.

Rumsfeld, like many hawks in those years after 9/11, liked to quote Winston Churchill. One of his famous Rumsfeld rules cites Churchill as saying: "Victory is never final. Defeat is never final. It is courage that counts."

Rumsfeld's victories were illusions. His defeats will outlive him. And his much-vaunted courage was a smokescreen for lies, crimes and deaths. If he was an exemplary public servant, we need to reimagine what public service actually means.