

Opinion

United States: Iraq was Donald Rumsfeld's war. It will forever be his legacy

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The late defence secretary's micromanagement style - arrogant, bullying and ignorant - helped ensure the disastrous outcome

Donald Rumsfeld, secretary of defense under George W Bush, who [died on 30 June](#) at the age of 88, enjoyed one all-important attribute, which was to appear larger than he actually was. He enhanced his comparatively diminutive 5ft 8in stature with the aid of thickly padded shoes with built-up heels, which caused him to waddle when he walked. His staff called them the "duck shoes". But he inflated his presence in other ways, too, promoting the image of a clear-thinking, decisive commander while determinedly deflecting responsibility when initiatives he had championed careened into disaster.

When American Airlines flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11, he hurried out of his office and headed for the site of the impact, spending a minute or so [helping to carry](#) a stretcher bearing one of the casualties. Meanwhile, the country was under attack, but no one knew where the chief executive of the US armed forces was to be found. As a senior White House official later complained to me: "He abandoned his post." The excursion elevated him to heroic status, as a decisive, take-charge leader, an image that persisted in part thanks to his heavily staffed publicity apparatus. It played no small part in distracting attention from his impatient neglect of warnings prior to 9/11 that a terrorist attack was likely.

Assuming office in 2001, he had loudly proclaimed his intention to "transform" the country's baroque military apparatus from top to bottom, but left unmentioned [for several months](#) the fact that he was recusing himself from decisions on which weapons to buy because he hadn't yet sold his stocks in defence corporations (which were climbing in value thanks to his promise of a budget boost). Questioned by investigators probing the scandal of a \$26bn (£19bn) contract for air force refuelling tankers, which ultimately led to [criminal prosecutions](#) and the jailing of several of those involved, he claimed to be completely unaware of the events, asserting that he never met defence contractors unless he "ran into them at a party some place".

Most famously, he vigorously promoted the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, deploying a special unit in the Pentagon called the [Office of Special Plans](#) to generate intelligence asserting Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction. When it became clear that Saddam had, in fact, no such weapons, he dodged responsibility for the fake intelligence. In the same vein, routine torture of prisoners by US troops came as news to him, while the thinly armoured vehicles in which troops were being killed by roadside bombs [were somebody else's responsibility](#). Whether the Iraq operation could have ended happily under any circumstances is open to doubt, but Rumsfeld's micromanagement style - arrogant, bullying and ignorant - helped ensure disaster.

His capricious interference in, for instance, the professional military's deployment planning before

the invasion meant that units often arrived without vehicles, medics and other essential components. There was no plan for what to do once US troops entered Baghdad. He gave no thought to the likely consequences of disbanding the Iraqi army, or how to cope with the post-invasion arson and rioting that destroyed what was left of the Iraqi administration. He refused to accept that escalating attacks on US units represented anything other than a rearguard effort by remnants of the old regime. Thanks to lengthening casualty lists, the true state of affairs could not be indefinitely denied – though Rumsfeld attempted for a time to keep reality at bay by forbidding his staff from [using the word “insurgent”](#), along with “quagmire” and “resistance”.

His earlier career should have given fair warning that there was less to the pugnacious little self-promoter than met the eye. His most signal contribution as defense secretary under President Ford was to energetically sponsor egregious inflation in estimates of the Soviet military threat, with the obvious corollary of a commensurate boost to US defence spending. The Pentagon budget had suffered an inevitable cut after the withdrawal from Vietnam, but under Rumsfeld’s auspices it began a steady upward climb that was only briefly interrupted by the disappearance of the Soviet enemy in 1991 – and has persisted to this day.

A field in which Rumsfeld did enjoy notable personal success in public life was one about which he could hardly boast: his efforts as an intriguer. Indeed, he earned praise from a master of the craft, Richard Nixon, who said of him, as recorded in the secret White House taping system, that “he’s a ruthless little bastard”. The same skills were evident in his business career. Leaving office when Jimmy Carter became president, he was hired by the Chicago Searle family to save GD Searle, their pharmaceutical corporation. The only product that could rescue the company was its newly discovered sweetener called [aspartame](#). Unfortunately, there were tests indicating that it gave rats brain cancer, and the regulators were reasonably refusing to authorise its release. Rumsfeld made it his business to reverse the decision. It took him four years, but assiduous courting of the incoming Reagan administration elicited the required result.

A more remarkable aspect of his legacy is its endurance. Where once he cheer-led a spectral Soviet military threat and consequent fattening of defence complex profits, his successors deploy much the same rhetoric about (shrunk) Russian armed forces, while whipping up alarms about the allegedly burgeoning Chinese menace – as, all the while, the Pentagon budget climbs steadily higher. Sons and daughters of US soldiers and marines that he dispatched to the Middle East are still being deployed to the region, with no end in sight. Most grimly of all, [Iraq](#) itself is still in ruins. To paraphrase Christopher Wren’s memorial in St Paul’s cathedral: if you seek his legacy, look around you.

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P.S.

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