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## The Rumsfeld Stain

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How does Donald Rumsfeld survive as defense secretary?

Much of what has happened to the military on his watch has been catastrophic. In Iraq, more than 1,600 American troops have died and many thousands have been maimed in a war that Mr. Rumsfeld mishandled from the beginning and still has no idea how to win. The generals are telling us now that the U.S. is likely to be bogged down in Iraq for years, and there are whispers circulating about the possibility of "defeat."

Potential recruits are staying away from the armed forces in droves. Most Americans want no part of the administration's hapless venture in Iraq. A woman in Connecticut with two college-age sons said to me recently: "My boys should die in Baghdad? For what?"

Parents from coast to coast are going out of their way to dissuade their children from joining the military. Recruiters, desperate and in many cases emotionally distraught after repeatedly missing their monthly goals, began abandoning admission standards and signing up individuals who were physically, mentally or morally unfit for service.

The abuses became so widespread that the Army suspended recruiting on Friday so recruiters could spend the day being retrained in the legal and ethical standards they are supposed to maintain. The Army is going through its toughest year for recruiting since the nation went to an all-volunteer military in 1973.

The military spent decades rebuilding its reputation and regaining the respect of the vast majority of the American people after the debacle in Vietnam. Under Mr. Rumsfeld, that hard-won achievement is being reversed. He invaded Iraq with too few troops, and too many of them were poorly trained and inadequately equipped. The stories about American troops dying on the battlefield because of a lack of protective armor have now been widely told.

The insurgency in Iraq appeared to take Mr. Rumsfeld completely by surprise. He expected to win the war in a walk. Or, perhaps, a strut.

Now the military is in a fix. Many of the troops have served multiple tours in Iraq and are weary. The insurgency remains strong, and the Iraq military has proved to be a disappointing ally.

A senior American officer, quoted last week in The Times, said that while he still believed the effort in Iraq would succeed, it could take "many years."

As if all this were not enough, there is also the grotesque and deeply shameful issue that will always be a part of Mr. Rumsfeld's legacy -- the manner in which American troops have treated prisoners under their control in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. There is no longer any doubt that large numbers of troops responsible for guarding and interrogating detainees somehow loosed their moorings to humanity, and began behaving as sadists, perverts and criminals.

The catalog of confirmed atrocities is huge. Consider just one paragraph from a long and horrifying story on Friday by Tim Golden of The Times about the torture and brutal deaths of two Afghan inmates at the hands of U.S. troops:

"In sworn statements to Army investigators, soldiers describe one female interrogator with a taste for humiliation stepping on the neck of one prostrate detainee and kicking another in the genitals. They tell of a shackled prisoner being forced to roll back and forth on the floor of a cell, kissing the boots of his two interrogators as he went. Yet another prisoner is made to pick plastic bottle caps out of a drum mixed with excrement and water as part of a strategy to soften him up for questioning."

These were among the milder abuses to come to light. The continuum of bad behavior that has been a hallmark of the so-called war on terror extends from this kind of activity to incidents of extreme torture and death.

Neither the troops nor the American public signed on for a war in Iraq that would last many years. And I can't believe there are many Americans who wanted their military sullied by the wanton behavior of the torture crowd.

The troops who do their jobs honestly and diligently, and who fight bravely when they have to, have been betrayed by leaders who encouraged abusive behavior and allowed atrocities to flourish.

Mr. Rumsfeld has driven the military into a ruinous quagmire, and there is no evidence at all that he's capable of finding a serviceable route out.