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The Rise and Fall of Colin Powell and the Powell Doctrine

WALTER LaFEBER

As Texas Governor George W. Bush moved toward the presidency in the late 1990s, public opinion polls regularly revealed that Colin Powell not only was better known and liked than Bush but also ranked among the most admired of all Americans. When the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, the polls again showed that Americans continued to admire and trust Powell, now their secretary of state. Twenty months later, the president forced Powell to resign. By then, November 2004, the secretary of state's gilded reputation had been badly tarnished by the terrible course of the bloody conflict in Iraq and the role he played before the war in justifying the invasion.

It is not one of the happier chapters in American biography but one of the most instructive. The story began in 1937 when Powell was born in New York City's Bronx neighborhood to parents who had left Jamaica to find opportunities in the city's teeming garment district. Colin had no desire to follow his father into the clothing industry. Resembling many immigrants' children, he went to the City College of New York (CCNY), an inexpensive but a demanding and remarkably successful institution. Powell was little more than a mediocre student, majoring for vague reasons in geology, until he discovered the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program at CCNY. He quickly took to its order, hierarchy, and physical and mental demands. By his graduation, the six-foot-one-inch second-generation immigrant, on his way to an adult weight of 200 pounds, was an outstanding student commander of his 1,000-strong ROTC unit.

ROTC required a further three-year commitment beyond graduation. When that term was up in 1961, Powell quickly reenlisted. "I was in a profession that would allow me to go as far as my talents would take me," he recalled, "and for a black, no other avenue in American society offered so much

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opportunity”¹ That same year, he met (and in 1962 married) Alma Johnson, a gifted woman from an upper-class Birmingham, Alabama African American family. Shortly after the wedding, Powell went to South Vietnam. President John F. Kennedy was escalating, as secretly as possible, the U.S. war effort against the North Vietnamese communist government, which was attempting to unite the country. Powell loved the experience. He believed that only the best and brightest were being sent at this point to wage a stealth war against the North and that his assignment signaled that the army saw him, in his words, as one of the “comers, walk-on water types being groomed for bright futures.”² He was wounded but remained through his one-year term. In 1968, he returned for a second tour. He now was one of the half million U.S. troops trying to win an unwinnable, fourteen-year-long U.S. war. He received a medal for heroism when, despite a broken ankle, he dragged three soldiers, including a general, from a downed helicopter.

The U.S. retreat from Vietnam between 1973 and the communist victory in 1975 was the lowest point in modern U.S. military history to that point. Powell was one of the young officers who determined to learn from the experience. He obtained a master’s degree in business, then became a commander in one of the most fabled U.S. military units, the 101st Airborne Division. By the early 1980s, his record had attracted invitations to serve in several important positions in Washington. Powell had established himself as that rare person who somehow understood both the civilian and the military sides of the Capitol. Even as a low-ranking Pentagon official, he also proved to be a quick learner when it came to moving the usually slow bureaucracies. In 1984, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, now Major-General Powell became an assistant to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. The secretary was about to issue a declaration that proved to be historic and, for Powell, life shaping.

Since the U.S. military had been forced to leave Vietnam in the mid-1970s, its officers had conducted quiet, intensive studies to discover what had gone wrong. Powell played a small role in some of these discussions but a more important part in shaping Weinberger’s thinking. A Middle East crisis that destroyed hundreds of American lives led the secretary of defense to decide it was time to announce the results of the nearly decade-long military studies. The crisis had developed in 1982 when Israel invaded neighboring Lebanon. Syria, the dominant power in Lebanon, and Syria’s allies kept the war escalating brutally into 1983. Then the Reagan administration, over the strong dissent of Weinberger and the American military, decided to send in 1,800 troops to help stabilize the ever more dangerous situation. In October 1983, a truck bomb exploded in the encampment killing 241 Americans—the worst single-day U.S. military death toll since the last days of World War II.

¹ Colin L. Powell, with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 59–66.

² Powell, *My American Journey*, 65–66.

Since those 1945 days, Washington officials had largely fixed their attention on the Cold War against the Soviet Union. But beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Middle East was moving to the forefront of U.S. diplomacy. The region had become the center of the world's oil production. The area had also been the center of ongoing conflicts between newly founded (in 1948) Israel and its neighboring Islamic nations. And since the 1950s, it was a region into which U.S. presidents sent their military forces, perhaps all too easily, until 241 of them had been slaughtered in a moment of 1983. In late November 1984, Weinberger responded to this tragedy as well as to the destructive effects of the Vietnam experience on the U.S. military in a Washington speech.

It became known as the Weinberger Doctrine and, later and more famously, as the Powell Doctrine. The secretary of defense began by declaring that the military must no longer be placed in killing fields when there seemed to be no overriding national interest at stake and no intention of fighting to win a complete victory. Weinberger announced that six major tests should be applied before civilian officials blithely deployed men and women into battle.

First, the "engagement" must be "deemed vital to our national interest or that of our allies." Second, U.S. forces should only be sent "with the clear intention of winning." Third, in putting American lives at stake, "we should have clearly defined political and military obligations." Fourth, the size and purpose of the force sent out to fight should be "continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary"—as had clearly not occurred when the situations in Vietnam and Lebanon rapidly changed. Fifth, troops should be assured, before they go abroad to fight and possibly die, that they have "the support of the American people and... Congress." Finally, and what would become of special importance to Powell over the next twenty years, Weinberger declared that "the commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort."³

American military officials quickly put this doctrine to work in the mid-1980s to counter civilian demands that troops be sent into the maelstrom of Central American revolutions. In 1987, Powell became involved in this struggle—and continued successfully to insist that the troops not be sent—when he became the top deputy in the National Security Council (NSC). Stationed in the White House, the NSC had been created in 1947 so that the president could better coordinate and ensure the carrying out of foreign policy decisions. It was a job for which Powell had immense talent, and later in 1987 he became the first African American to hold the top post, NSC adviser. When George H. W. Bush became president in 1989 and appointed his own NSC staff, Powell notably chose to stay in the military rather than possibly make a small fortune as a civilian. Later that year, the newly promoted four-star general was chosen by Bush over dozens of older generals to the most exalted and powerful military

³ Transcript of "Excerpts from Remarks by Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger to the National Press Club, Washington, DC, November 28, 1984," in author's possession.

position, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He now became the first African American to head the U.S. military.

Powell's initial major crisis erupted when President Bush moved to overthrow the Panamanian regime of Manuel Noriega. As a result of a 1977 U.S.–Panama treaty, the great U.S.-built canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans was slowly coming under Panama's control. Bush, however, increasingly condemned Noriega's drug running, violent acts against Americans, and threats against the canal. As the president determined to intervene, it became a test of the Weinberger Doctrine. Powell insisted that the overthrow of Noriega be a quick, overwhelming strike carried out by a force of 20,000 Americans, accompanied by the U.S. Air Force, against a handful of Panamanians who had no air force. In December 1989, the American operation quickly forced Noriega to flee, finally captured him after a series of almost comic failures, and installed a friendlier government. Powell became widely known as the highly articulate general who often explained on television why the operation was going so well.

Along with this not surprising success of the Weinberger Doctrine, the months of 1989–1990 marked another milestone of much greater importance: the collapse of the Soviet Union's East European empire and the rapid ending of the nearly half-century-long Cold War. The Soviet Union itself was enduring sometimes bloody internal division as it headed for its death, finally, on Christmas Day 1991. The United States emerged as the world's unchallenged, supreme power. Indeed, some overly imaginative American observers claimed their nation was nothing less than the most powerful force in world affairs since the Roman Empire of 1900 years before. Despite the ending of the Cold War, moreover, U.S. military budgets remained around the \$300 billion mark, or more than the combined military spending of the next twenty most powerful nations.

Powell headed this juggernaut. In 1990, he spectacularly put it to work. The general did so by carefully following the six points of the Weinberger Doctrine as the United States went to war against a most surprising enemy: Saddam Hussein, the unquestioned, brutal ruler of Iraq since 1978. Saddam was a surprising enemy in 1990 because during the previous decade he had been an ally of President Ronald Reagan. Both men and their people had one strong tie: they feared and despised the religious rulers of Iran who had overthrown the U.S.-supported government in 1979 and taken more than 50 Americans hostage. Saddam, an ambitious secular Sunni Muslim, had quickly declared war in 1980 on neighboring Iran, now a fervently religious Shia Muslim regime. The bloody eight-year war that followed claimed more than a million casualties. Despite Reagan's heavy economic support for Saddam, however, the long conflict ended in stalemate. Massive U.S. aid to Saddam nevertheless continued, even though the Iraqi leader supported the Palestinians who fought Israel, the leading U.S. ally in the Middle East, and even though he ruthlessly executed and jailed those Iraqis he suspected of opposing him.

All this suddenly changed in July 1990. Frustrated by falling oil prices and determined to obtain ports giving him greater access to the Persian Gulf, Saddam

struck south and seized oil-rich Kuwait. Fear now arose that he was in position to attack or at least effectively threaten his eastern neighbor Saudi Arabia. The Saudis held one-quarter of the globe's known oil reserves. They had also been a highly valued U.S. ally since 1945. After some hesitation (Saddam, after all, had also been a longtime American ally), President Bush decided the Iraqis had to be driven from Kuwait.

The question was how, and Powell was at the center of the debate in late 1990. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz wanted to launch a massive military attack to drive Saddam's forces out of Kuwait and, indeed, set in motion Saddam's overthrow. The United States had never intervened massively, with hundreds of thousands of troops, in the Middle East. Unless perfectly conducted, the military feared that such a campaign could become a Vietnam-like morass. And it was questionable whether Kuwait was worth it: "I think we'd go to war over Saudi Arabia, but I doubt we'd go to war over Kuwait," Powell said privately.⁴

In his eyes, Kuwait did not fit the Weinberger Doctrine's demand that U.S. forces face death only to defend the most important national interests. Nor did a Kuwaiti campaign fit the doctrine's requirement that sending troops into battle must be the last resort—that is, after political and economic pressures on Saddam were tried and failed. Neither Cheney nor Wolfowitz had served in the military. Both had been able to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War years. They viewed the services not through the prism of Weinberger's Doctrine but as flexible instruments that should automatically be on call to carry out the nation's foreign policy. Cheney and Wolfowitz's determination to destroy Weinberger's (and soon Powell's) principles thus began in 1990, then reappeared with even greater intensity after the September 11, 2001, terrorist strikes on the United States.

Powell lost the first part of the debate in 1990–1991. He could not convince the president to use economic pressures against Saddam instead of immediately dispatching military forces. In late 1990, President Bush ordered several hundred thousand troops to the Middle East. He also dramatically built a coalition of major powers that, for the most part, not only committed their own military forces but also sent so much money for the effort that in the end the United States had to spend virtually none of its own dollars.

Powell and the Weinberger Doctrine did succeed in shaping the next part of the debate. Bush slowly built up overwhelming American, especially congressional, support for the operation. The president also decided on a carefully limited invasion and then—most importantly—closely followed Powell's advice by committing overwhelming force to achieve the single specific goal: the liberation of Kuwait. In the 100-hour war of late February 1991, the U.S.-led forces of 550,000 soldiers destroyed large numbers of badly outgunned Iraqi

⁴ James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 184.

troops. The road to Iraq's capital, Baghdad, lay open. Bush refused to take it. He and Powell had achieved their primary objectives. Kuwait was liberated, and Saudi Arabia was no longer in danger. Many of Bush's allies, moreover, wanted nothing to do with an attack on Baghdad and the overthrow of Saddam. Led by the Saudis themselves, these allies feared a civil war might erupt in Iraq and destabilize the entire region. It would be better to let the Iraqis and Iranians continue to balance each other so neither could again threaten their neighbors. Perhaps, as Bush and his advisers hoped, the weakened Saddam might in any case be overthrown by his enemies within Iraq.

The Gulf War of 1991 was, on one level, a breathtaking military triumph televised around the globe. It dramatically demonstrated that the old Cold War had been replaced by a "new order," as President Bush liked to call it—a new world dominated by U.S. wishes and power. Americans happily accepted Bush's rosy analysis as they set out in the 1990s to enjoy the new world they believed they largely controlled—by the international popularity of their music, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Nike shoes as well as by their military. In the middle of the decade, they paid more attention to their president's private life than to his foreign policies. Televised newscasts helped Americans escape into an unreal, parochial world as coverage of overseas affairs was cut by at least one-third during the 1990s. Many Americans became narrow intellectual isolationists, moreover, just as terrorist attacks worldwide multiplied between 1993 and 2001.

The Weinberger/Powell Doctrine inadvertently helped to generate this intellectual isolationism. The quick, overwhelming military success in the 1991 Gulf War seemed to show conclusively that Americans and their friends had both the power to maintain world order and the leadership to decide wisely when that power should be deployed. Powell, their top military leader, had not wanted to rush into war. He indeed seemed to differ from many other commanders in history by wanting no war at all, at least not until all six of Weinberger's 1984 requirements were met. And in 1990–1991, Powell had added a seventh point: before troops were committed to battle, U.S. officials must have worked out an "exit strategy," in a definite time frame, so the soldiers would not be expected to stay anywhere and fight indefinitely. Again: no more Vietnams. The 1991 invasion had worked perfectly in this respect. The doctrine was now wholly associated with Powell.

If that was one result of the conflict, however, there was another. Cheney and Wolfowitz led a group that drew quite different lessons from the war than did Powell. The secretary of defense and his top civilian assistant loyally supported, at the time, Bush's decisions not to attack Baghdad itself and not to overthrow Saddam. They, like Bush and Powell, hoped the Iraqis themselves would destroy Saddam. But that did not occur. Saddam ruthlessly killed those he suspected of trying to remove him. Reports circulated that the dictator was reviving his programs to develop nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons—programs that he had begun in the 1970s but that had been partially destroyed

by a precise Israeli air attack in 1981. By 1992, one could wonder who had won the 1991 war. Saddam was firmly in power, while George Bush lost the U.S. presidential election to an upstart Arkansas Democratic governor, William Jefferson Clinton.

In the last months of the Bush presidency, Cheney and Wolfowitz undertook a full analysis of the nation's future strategy. The result was the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), a supposedly top-secret document quickly leaked to the press. The DPG was as far from the Powell Doctrine as Powell's battlefield experiences in the 1960s had been from Cheney and Wolfowitz's student days. The leaked DPG draft created a sensation when it stated that the United States not only intended to dominate the raw material and oil-producing areas, especially in the Middle East, but also would actively prevent anyone (and anyone included allies) from even moving toward a position that might threaten U.S. supremacy.

The Cold War with the Soviets was now to be replaced, apparently, by a Cold War against everyone else. This first draft was rewritten under public pressure but only slightly. Allies were no longer singled out. The document nevertheless remained clear that the U.S. military would not wait for a great power (say, China) to emerge as a threat but would take early steps so that no such threat could emerge—steps that became known as “preemption” after 2001. Nor would the United States necessarily depend on allies, as it had so successfully in the 1991 war. The supposedly all-powerful Americans would be willing to move alone.

This DPG directly challenged the Powell Doctrine. It used vague terms to describe vague challenges but concluded that the commitment of American men and women to fight emerging threats would be assumed. There would not be a checklist, as Weinberger had stipulated, to be met before U.S. troops went into battle. This approach of the DPG eerily anticipated Cheney and Wolfowitz's policies a decade later.

In his last months as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (he retired in September 1993), General Powell repeatedly had to defend his doctrine against the demands of the new Clinton administration. It was an incredible nine months for Clinton, who, like Cheney and Wolfowitz, had received student deferments, not military training, in the 1960s. The president from Arkansas deployed U.S. forces to more locations on more occasions during his presidency (1993–2001) than any of his predecessors in the White House had dispatched them during any other eight-year period of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the apparently unquestioned supremacy of U.S. military power allowed Clinton to use the military extravagantly.

The commitments began in the last days of the Bush presidency when the outgoing and incoming chief executives agreed that small U.S. forces should land under UN auspices in Somalia, the East African country where raging tribal wars were killing many civilians and starving others. In December 1992, the first of some 25,000 U.S. troops landed. They did so as Hollywood

Klieg lights set up by American television crews turned night into midday on the landing beaches. Resembling not a life-and-death situation but a blurry Saturday afternoon movie, the episode made a major splash on U.S. television screens and gave Americans a dangerously misleading view of the civil bloodshed—and thus further undermined the Powell Doctrine's emphasis on the need for great care before putting soldiers' lives at stake. But then, if Hollywood said so, U.S. forces must be unbeatable.

As Clinton entered the presidency in January 1993, the ethnically and religiously complex state of Yugoslavia was also coming apart. The dominant Orthodox Christians were “ethnically cleansing” (i.e., slaughtering or driving out) Muslims in the area of Bosnia. At a Clinton cabinet meeting, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright urged committing U.S. forces to stop the “cleansing.” Powell opposed such a sudden move. He demanded that the political preconditions of his doctrine be met—what, for example, would be the specific political objectives of the troops? Albright lashed back, “What’s the point of having this superb military that you’re [Powell] always talking about if we can’t use it?” As the general later recalled, “I thought I would have an aneurysm. American GIs were not toy soldiers to be moved around on some sort of global game board.” He gave Albright a stunning statistic: “our armed forces” had been committed “more than two dozen times in the preceding three years” for war and humanitarian missions. Powell, however, had first obtained “a clear goal” before they were sent.⁵ There were to be no more vague, endless commitments as in Vietnam. No troops went to Yugoslavia in 1993.

Somalia turned out to be quite another story. Powell understood that the U.S. forces were to help open up food supply routes for the starving. In June 1993, Clinton and the United Nations changed the mission. The president ordered the troops to track down troublemaking clan chiefs, that is, to become directly involved in the conflict. As Powell recorded in his memoirs, the objective was now “‘nation building,’ the phrase I had first heard when we went into Vietnam. From what I have observed of history, the will to build a nation originates from within its people, not from the outside.”⁶

The general wanted little to do with the growing American idea, spread most notably by Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan, that the United States had a manifest destiny to spread democracy around the world—with military force if necessary. Somalia became blood-soaked evidence for his doubts. In the early autumn of 1993, a Somalia chieftain’s forces shot down a U.S. helicopter and killed eighteen Americans. Television now showed not a Disney scene but the mutilated bodies of the U.S. victims being dragged by gleeful Somalis through dusty streets. Several months later, a beleaguered Clinton pulled out the remaining U.S. troops even though Somalia was sinking into chaos.

⁵ Powell, *My American Journey*, 560–61.

⁶ Powell, *My American Journey*, 565.

For the U.S. forces, this experience was a stunning case study of what could happen when the Powell Doctrine was not followed, especially when the political situation was not understood and the political objectives not thought through. But the tragedy did little to restrain Americans' growing belief that they could exercise their unmatched military power anywhere they saw their interests in danger. American troops went into the fragmenting Yugoslavia between 1995 and 1999 along with UN forces. With Powell retired, his doctrine was not closely followed. There was not, for example, any understanding about an "exit strategy" for the forces. Consequently, a dozen years after the commitment, American troops remained in parts of the former Yugoslavia.

Retired, Powell watched all this as a civilian for the first time in thirty-five years. After living on a government salary, he set out to make money for his family. He succeeded spectacularly. The retired general received a \$6 million advance for his autobiography, then more millions when it became a best-seller in 1995 and helped enable him to charge high five-figure fees for public speeches. The Powells particularly devoted their time and new wealth to city youth organizations. In 1996, "the most trusted man in America," according to polls, considered running for president.⁷ He finally decided not to after his wife, Alma, threatened, "If you run, I'm gone."⁸ Among other reasons, she feared that this first serious African American candidate for the White House might have attempts made on his life.

He said little publicly about Clinton foreign policies. Those who had opposed him in 1990–1991, especially Wolfowitz and Cheney, were less restrained. Wolfowitz, now a dean at Johns Hopkins University, kept up a drumbeat of criticism, especially in regard to what he interpreted as the president's supposed restraint in using force and also in Clinton's failure to destroy Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. In the 2000 presidential election campaign, Wolfowitz led a so-called neoconservative movement committed to reshaping the foreign policy debate. The neocons' media outlet was *The Weekly Standard*, edited by William Kristol.

This movement emphasized the need to freely use U.S. military forces to ensure that no rivals (China was particularly fingered) could even approach the point when they could challenge the United States. The neoconservatives also emphasized that a goal of U.S. policy must be the spreading of democracy. Democracies, the argument went, were more peaceful than other forms of government, and global stability in the interest of the United States could best be assured by their expansion. It thus was justifiable, the neocons added, to use force to extend democracy. As one phrased it, "The best democracy program ever invented is the U.S. Army."⁹ (That statement, among its other problems,

⁷ Karen DeYoung, "Falling on His Sword," *Washington Post*, 1 October 2006.

⁸ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 11–12.

⁹ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 85.

had already been disproved by a full century of the U.S. Army's post-1890 interventions in Central American and Caribbean nations.) It followed that the Middle East should become a case study where democracy could take over not only to topple Saddam but also to protect the more democratic Israel, the major U.S. ally in the region and a special concern of the neoconservatives. Powell agreed about Israel's importance, but he wanted nothing to do with the other two objectives—using military force more freely and attempting to reform key (and chaotic) parts of the world by somehow making them more democratic.

By 2000, the Republican presidential nominee, Texas Governor George W. Bush, had put together a foreign policy advisory panel that included three groups. The first was the neoconservatives' leading voice, Wolfowitz. The second was made up of so-called realists who largely agreed on the importance of Israel and the need to use technology so that the military could move even more quickly and effectively. In other words, they, like the neocons, wanted to destroy some of the restraints that the Powell Doctrine had imposed on this marvelous force. But the realists had little interest in the idea of expanding democracy. They were, after all, realists and thus were willing to settle for regimes that were stable and pro-American. Cheney and his close friend, former (and future) Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, as well as Condoleezza Rice, a former Stanford University political scientist who was especially close to the Bush family, belonged in the realist category.

The third group advising Bush was a group of one, Colin Powell. He wanted little to do with the neocon–realist happy acceptance of using force. Nor was Powell willing to embrace the highly complex—and often destabilizing—goal of spreading democracy; he especially had no illusions after his Vietnam experience that the U.S. Army was “the best democracy program ever invented.” Bush and Powell were congenial in 2000 not because they shared foreign policy views. The highly parochial Texas governor knew little about international affairs. Nor were they especially compatible personally. Between 2001 and early 2005 when Powell finally resigned, the two men had remarkably few private conversations.

They joined forces in 2000 because Bush badly needed Powell's public support to win the White House. The Democratic Party candidate, Vice President Al Gore, won more popular votes in the election, but, thanks finally to a highly controversial Supreme Court decision, Bush won the all-important Electoral College count.

Not surprisingly, neither the new president nor his chief political adviser, Karl Rove, was enthusiastic about giving much credit for the victory to Powell. Bush did pay his political debt and made the obvious choice on its merits by appointing him secretary of state. Powell became the first African American to hold this highest of cabinet ranks. Then trouble began. Cheney, now the vice president, had helped convince Bush to name Rumsfeld secretary of defense. Cheney and Rumsfeld's intimate friendship went back a quarter century when

both had served under President Gerald Ford. They now set out to remake U.S. military forces and policy.

By using new, highly expensive technology, Rumsfeld believed that the American military could be reduced in size and thus be more nimble and easier to deploy to any trouble spot. Such a belief, of course, ran directly against the Powell Doctrine's emphasis on learning from Vietnam (and Somalia) that the considerable political problems (such as obtaining U.S. support and having a definite date for the American troops to depart from the commitment) be carefully ironed out before committing men and women to battle—and then committing them in overwhelming numbers. "Rumsfeld's Rules," as they became known, included the command "Reserve the right to interfere into anything, and exercise it."¹⁰ Nothing could have been farther from Powell's rules.

The new secretary of state had good reason to think the president himself was the true son of his father who a decade earlier had certainly deployed military power but had done so in the 1991 Iraqi conflict within carefully marked limits and in alliance with long-term (and wealthy) friends. The senior Bush wanted no part of unilateralism and nation building, nor, the son repeatedly said during the 2000 campaign, did he. In mid-December 2000, the newly elected president, with Powell at his side, promised to "conduct our foreign policy in the spirit of national unity and friendship." He emphasized that the new secretary of state "believes, as I do, that we must work closely with our allies and friends.... He believes, as I do, that our nation is best when we project strength and our purpose with humility." Powell then stepped to the microphone to underline the point: strong cooperation with allies was to be "the center of our foreign policy activities."¹¹

It was not to be. In his first months in office, Bush retracted Clinton's pledge and pulled the United States out of the much-lauded Kyoto treaty, which aimed to improve the environment through international cooperation. Longtime European allies had shaped the pact, but that made no difference to Bush, who only wanted to have maximum freedom of action, especially on economic issues. The president next reversed Clinton's cooperative policies toward a key Asian ally, South Korea. The North Korean communist regime's ambition to become a nuclear power had supposedly been contained in a 1994 treaty pieced together by the United States, along with considerable support from South Korea. The agreement had broken down by 2001, and Bush embarrassed the South Korean president, who happened to be standing beside him, by declaring that there would be no further talks with North Korea. The next January, the president termed the North Koreans a member of "the axis of evil." (North Korea responded with a nuclear test and an experimental missile launching. In 2006, Bush, sinking in a Middle East war and feeling intense pressure from China and South Korea, finally gave in and

¹⁰ Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 63.

¹¹ Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 296–97.

negotiated with this “axis of evil” a preliminary pact in which North Korea promised to stop its growing nuclear program in return for massive U.S. economic aid.)

On both issues, the Kyoto treaty and the North Korean crisis, Bush and Cheney largely ignored the secretary of state—and of course, all the closest allies of the United States. Powell’s top aide and close friend, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, remarked that Bush had put Powell in the “refrigerator” and was to be taken out only when Powell served the president’s purposes, not when he threatened to confuse Bush.¹² The secretary of state complained but not publicly. Cheney was considerably more important in making foreign policy, although as time passed it became clear he was not making it very well. The vice president followed a U.S. tradition of wanting to go it alone, to have obligations to no one, to conduct foreign policy secretly as if it were no one else’s (as the secretary of state’s) business, to dictate and not negotiate, to use force easily and with bombastic threats, to ignore (or simply curse, sometimes profanely) members of Congress and informed critics, and to divide the world too simplistically between the good and the bad. These characteristics sometimes fit the United States when it fought Indians and Mexicans in the nineteenth century. They turned out to be tragically out of place in a complex, atom bomb–laden, twenty-first-century world.

But Powell, the team player with a soldier’s loyalty to the president, did little as Bush continually bypassed his secretary of state. Powell later said that Bush had no system or regular procedure for making life-and-death foreign policy decisions, by which he meant that the president made decisions after private meetings with Cheney and, increasingly, Rumsfeld but not with him. The former soldier fervently believed in proper procedure; it was absolutely necessary for the adequate examination of all perspectives and possibilities as well as politically imperative to obtain as many pledges of cooperation from overseas friends as possible.

Only in one major crisis during the first half of 2001 did Bush push Powell to the front. In April, a U.S. EP-3 plane was spying on China when a Chinese fighter plane that was trying to scare it off collided with the EP-3. The fighter plane crashed in the South China Sea, the pilot never found. The U.S. aircraft made an emergency landing in China. Its twenty-four-person crew was captured. Beijing claimed the plane was flying in Chinese airspace. Washington correctly responded that the aircraft was sixty-two miles from land, that is, in territory that everyone but China recognized as common international air space. The neoconservatives, led by Wolfowitz and Kristol, wanted to get tough. They had condemned Clinton’s cooperative attitude toward Beijing and continually warned that China was a dangerous military as well as economic competitor. Bush, for his part, simply wanted to free the Americans and get back to normal with 1.5 billion people who were increasingly enrapturing American investors,

¹² Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 79.

traders, and manufacturers who hoped to exploit that vast market. Powell worked out language that diplomatically expressed an apology to the Chinese and freed the Americans. Led by Kristol's *Weekly Standard*, neoconservatives condemned the deal as humiliating. In reality, the deal was not humiliating, but it was the first and last time that Bush allowed Powell to define the policy in settling a potentially explosive problem—and three and a half years remained in the president's first term.

"I'm not a textbook player, I'm a gut player," Bush proudly—and most revealingly—told a reporter.¹³ Why in a nuclear world the president wanted to follow an unpredictable "gut" instead of carefully thought-out and more predictable "textbook" approaches was not clear. After promising in the 2000 campaign that he would be humble and work closely with allies, Bush had moved rapidly in the opposite direction of unilateralism. Much to Powell's displeasure, the president took the same approach to Russia. Determined to escape from a 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with the Soviets (which had sharply limited ABM sites in order to avoid an accelerated nuclear race), Bush announced that he would junk the pact. The United States would build more ABM systems. The implication was that the systems would guard against possible Chinese or North Korean nuclear strikes. The Russians were angry but had no choice but accept the American pullout. On September 11, 2001, Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, was to give a speech attacking the Clinton administration for not properly dealing with the great threat to the United States: a too-limited antimissile defense.

Instead of giving the speech, however, she spent the day in a bunker underneath the White House. In a series of attacks, Islamic terrorists seized, in flight, four U.S. passenger jets on that bright, clear September morning. Two planes flew into and destroyed New York City's 110-story World Trade Center buildings. Another was driven at 300 miles per hour into the Pentagon. The fourth was probably to hit another Washington, target, but courageous passengers fought for control of the plane until it crashed in Pennsylvania and killed everyone aboard. Nearly 3,000 persons died in the attacks.

Within hours, U.S. officials knew that the terrorists had been trained and directed by Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda organization. Bin Laden, from a rich Saudi Arabian family, had once fought with Americans in the 1980s against the Soviets in Afghanistan. But the U.S. decision in 1991 to keep troops in Saudi Arabia, site of some of Islam's holiest shrines, had infuriated the fanatically religious bin Laden. He had launched a series of attacks between 1993 and 2000 that claimed hundreds of lives, including many Americans. Bush had condemned Clinton for not responding more forcefully, but despite many warnings from his own intelligence officers during the first eight months of 2001, the new president did nothing.

¹³ Woodward, *Bush at War*, 342.

The day after the attacks, Americans entered a new era in their history. It was especially new in the sense that the enemy was not, as had always been the case in the past, a particular nation. Bin Laden's al Qaeda had moved among a number of countries during the 1990s. No longer did destroying a nation (such as obliterating Germany or Japan in World War II) mean destroying this new enemy. The terrorism, moreover, was inspired by a religious fanaticism, the kind resulting in a willingness to commit suicide—as, indeed, had the September 11 Muslims who drove the planes into buildings at high speeds. Bin Laden aimed to expel the United States and Israel from the Middle East, then impose a religious “caliphate” (ruler) over victorious Islam. The overwhelming number of the world's 1 billion Muslims, however, wanted no part of bin Laden's religious fanaticism, and many had long been pro-American.

In 1996, al Qaeda established training bases in Afghanistan when that country came under the control of fellow Sunni Muslims, the Taliban. Immediately after the September 11 attacks, Bush and his advisers, including Powell, determined to invade Afghanistan, destroy the terrorist bases, replace the Taliban with a democratic regime, and capture bin Laden. Aided by longtime allies, including especially Europeans, Canadians, and Latin Americans, U.S.-led forces moved swiftly into Afghanistan in October 2001, just weeks after the September 11 attacks. Powell's diplomacy played an essential role. Bush needed the help of Pakistan, Afghanistan's next-door neighbor. Pakistan, however, had long worked with the Taliban. Of equal importance, in 1999 a Pakistani military general, Pervez Musharraf, had seized power and replaced an elected government. Washington had condemned the takeover and attempted to isolate Pakistan.

Powell now changed the U.S. course. He told Musharraf, a fellow military officer, that Pakistan and the United States needed each other. The Pakistanis had their own terrorists sitting on their border with Afghanistan and could use U.S. military help. To make his point clear, Powell threatened Musharraf with more U.S. economic and political sanctions if the Pakistanis did not cooperate. Musharraf came aboard. He became perhaps the most important (if not always cooperative) of American allies in the wars against terrorism. Bush later admitted that Powell deserved the credit for bringing the Pakistanis over to the American side.

The invasion of Afghanistan was not conducted according to the Powell Doctrine. There was no overwhelming force committed, and, as it turned out, there was little understanding among Washington officials about what they wanted to achieve other than destroying al Qaeda's training bases and removing the Taliban regime. The U.S. military indeed depended on larger Afghan forces, who had their own separate and often conflicting interests. At one point in late 2001, it seemed that bin Laden and the top al Qaeda leadership were surrounded, but—despite Bush's Texas cowboy boast that he would get bin Laden dead or alive—the terrorist leader escaped into the mountains of the Afghan-Pakistani border. Contrary to Bush's 2000 campaign promises, moreover, the United States was now necessarily committed to nation

building—the building, no less, of one of the most primitive and divided nations on earth. At this point in early 2002, Bush began to pull U.S. Special Forces and Arabic-speaking experts out of Afghanistan. He had another, much more important target for them.

The target was Iraq. In the first days of the administration, long before the September 11 attacks, Paul Wolfowitz, now holding the number two position in the Defense Department under Rumsfeld, had pushed his long-held idea that the United States should overthrow Saddam Hussein. By 20 September, nine days after the attacks in New York and Washington, U.S. officials, led by Wolfowitz, were considering the invasion of Iraq. Three motives emerged. The first was the belief that Saddam Hussein was producing or was about to produce nuclear, chemical, and/or biological weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This became the all-important argument and fear that Bush later used to convince Americans that an invasion was necessary. The second motive was to install in Iraq a democratic government that would be the necessary first step in overthrowing other authoritarian regimes in the area and making much of the Middle East politically resemble the region's only declared democracy, Israel. That possibly replacing authoritarian governments in, say, Egypt and Saudi Arabia meant replacing two of the most pro-American regimes did not seem to disturb most U.S. officials. Third, replacing Saddam, who offered \$25,000 to families whose children carried out suicide bombings of Israelis, would help protect the leading U.S. ally in the region.

Powell understood this third point, but he strongly opposed the first two motives. The secretary of state doubted that Saddam was making WMD and believed that if he was, the programs could be controlled and even destroyed by internationally imposed economic and political sanctions. Indeed, the secretary of state had concluded—correctly as it turned out—that Saddam was not a military threat. Iraq, Powell declared in early 2001, “is fundamentally a broken, weak country—[with] one-third the military force it had some 10 years ago. We really did what we said we were going to do [in 1991]—bring them down to size.”¹⁴

As for turning the Middle East into Jeffersonian democracies, Powell knew too much about the region to try to follow that pipe dream. He admired flourishing democracies but understood that democracy meant not merely casting votes. A democracy had to rest at least on a fair, enforceable legal system and a political consensus that agreed on political and economic rules. An equitable, widely accepted distribution of property also had to exist as a foundation on which political democracy could rest. Little of this existed in the Middle East outside of Israel.

Powell might have been the most admired of Washington officials, but he had become the odd man out of the Bush administration. In 2002, Cheney and Rumsfeld followed Wolfowitz's lead in claiming that Saddam had to be

¹⁴ Jane Perlez, “The General Picks Up Where He Left Off,” *New York Times*, 28 January 2001.

removed, especially because of his supposed WMD programs. National Security Council Adviser Condoleezza Rice's job was to ensure that the president received complete and informed advice from all sides. She was too weak, however, to confront Cheney and Rumsfeld, who, it was later learned, constantly and secretly met with Bush—quite unlike Powell. The secretary of state later bitterly complained that there existed no regular, systematic, agreed-on policy process, as there had been in the 1990–1991 run-up to war and even later under the supposedly disorganized Clinton. Rice was unable to create a procedure through which the president could listen to Powell and Rumsfeld or Cheney systematically argue out matters of life and death. Such a system did not appear because Bush was uninterested in such fundamental debates. He and his political advisers were frantic to present a unified government. One method for accomplishing that was to prevent arguments. And, as noted, the president boasted that he followed his gut instincts, not textbooks. Powell, the good soldier, went along.

Until August 2002. Earlier that summer, word spread around Washington that the president had decided to invade Iraq. In his January 2002 State of the Union Address, Bush had caused a sensation by defining Iraq, North Korea, and Iran as the “axis of evil.” Everyone knew what had happened in World War II to the last Axis powers, Germany and Japan. In a June speech at West Point, the president issued what became known as the Bush doctrine: the United States need not wait to be attacked (as in 1917 and 1941) but had the right to launch a preemptive strike on any nation that might be preparing for war against Americans. (Bush did not note that to make such a preemptive attack necessary and justifiable, full and sound intelligence information about the grave threat the targeted nation posed was absolutely essential.) In July 2002, top British officials in Washington reported to London that they had learned Bush had made the decision to strike Iraq.¹⁵ The public declarations of Cheney and Rumsfeld grew more warlike. They not only claimed that Saddam Hussein had WMD but also intimated that he was significantly linked to the September 11 attacks and al Qaeda—a claim no one ever proved and U.S. intelligence flatly denied.

On 5 August 2002, Powell finally obtained help from Rice, who arranged a long dinner conversation with Bush. An attack on Iraq, the secretary of state warned, could dangerously destabilize the Middle East, including such good allies as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It would also divert attention and resources from the real enemy: al Qaeda terrorists who remained safe and hidden along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. You will be responsible for “25 million people” in Iraq, Powell told the president, “you’ll own it all.” The invasion will

¹⁵ The British report can be found in many sources; note especially the quotes and context provided in Frank Rich, “The Secret Way to War,” *New York Review of Books*, 6 April 2006; a stunned British military response is analyzed in Richard Norton-Taylor and Julian Borger, “Iraq Attack Plans Alarm Top Military,” *The Guardian* (London), 30 July 2002.

dominate everything else in the Bush presidency. Privately the secretary of state called this “the Pottery Barn rule: you break it, you own it.”¹⁶ He further warned Bush that the United States had to have strong international support, especially the United Nations and a coalition of powerful friends. Clearly, he saw this warning (i.e., take all this to the United Nations and our closest European allies of the United States) as a way to avoid, not make, war and to apply joint pressure on Iraq. Bush apparently saw it quite differently: an approach to the United Nations would give the organization and U.S. allies a chance to join an invasion that he seemed to believe was inevitable. He agreed with Powell’s urgent request to go to the United Nations for support.

The secretary of state thought he had checked the Cheney–Rumsfeld–Wolfowitz drive toward war. He had not. In late August, the vice president gave a speech which warned that UN inspections of Iraq would be useless. Cheney said it flatly: there was “no doubt”—Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD).¹⁷ When Powell tried to counter by publicly coming out in favor of UN inspections, at least seven U.S. newspaper editorials (as he later noted) suggested that he should consider resigning. Leading American newspapers, columnists, historians, and television commentators joined an accelerating—and unquestioning—demand for war. They were led by the Fox News Network and several newspapers that had picked up often highly questionable information from Cheney. The vice president would then neatly quote Fox or the journals as authoritative sources for the information when he was, in reality, only passing on his own ideas to innocent listeners. Powell could not keep up with such tactics.

In September 2002, Bush seemed to be following Powell’s advice by going to the United Nations to demand full inspection of Iraq’s possible WMD sites. Powell worked to follow up the speech with a tough UN resolution. The 8 November resolution, number 1441, warned that if Saddam continued to violate his obligations to allow open UN inspection and to destroy his WMD, “serious consequences” would follow. Powell, moreover, stunned everyone, including Bush, by obtaining unanimous support for this resolution from the fifteen Security Council members, including Russia, China, Syria, and even the highly reluctant French. But “serious consequences” did not specify war; Powell would have to come back to the United Nations to obtain that authority.

Soon after his success at the United Nations in the autumn of 2002, the secretary of state began losing what little leverage he had over U.S. policy. A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), written by some of the government’s intelligence officers, laid out details of what it termed Iraq’s continuing programs for WMD. The paper had a great effect on public opinion, strengthened prowar voices, and weakened Powell. The NIE drew on suspect Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) materials. It also used documents from the Defense Department

¹⁶ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 149–50.

¹⁷ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 442.

that were highly selective, prowar, and later proven mistaken. Much of the prowar intelligence had suspicious, if not weird, origins. One such source was “Curveball,” an Iraqi held by the Germans. “Curveball” had told German intelligence that Saddam had mobile biological weapon laboratories. The Germans, however, would not let a U.S. agent interview “Curveball” because they considered him unreliable, a drunkard, and even “crazy.”¹⁸ But “Curveball’s” made-up information helped shape the NIE, Bush’s speeches, and even Powell’s influential February 2003 speech to the United Nations.

Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld also drew helpful information from Ahmed Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress, who had long been exiled from Iraq. He had also fled Jordan after being convicted of fraud in a banking scandal. As a Shiia Muslim, Chalabi was close to the Shiia government of Iran, one of the axis of evil. Bush and especially the Defense Department nevertheless passed \$350,000 to Chalabi, who constructed stories for the Bush administration’s use about Saddam’s WMD. Chalabi happily joined the chorus calling for the dictator’s overthrow—a chorus that included Saddam’s old enemy and Chalabi’s close associate Iran. And over all the NIE intelligence stood Cheney, who, as several CIA agents bitterly recalled, visited the agency a number of times to hint it should find more evidence with which to condemn Saddam. “The administration used intelligence not to inform decision-making, but to justify a decision already made” for war, complained a top CIA official responsible for handling the Middle East.¹⁹

The State Department’s intelligence officers were among the few in Washington who consistently raised questions about the slanted, questionable, prowar information from “Curveball,” Chalabi, and the Defense Department. Nor could the top U.S. Army intelligence officer working with the forces preparing for the invasion figure out what was happening: of the 946 Iraqi sites that prowar voices claimed had WMD, this officer could not “say with confidence that there were any weapons of mass destruction or stockpiles at a single site. Not one.”²⁰ Rumsfeld had claimed to know for certain that Saddam possessed such weapons, but when UN inspectors failed to find them and asked the secretary of defense for help in fixing the specific locations, Rumsfeld responded with generalizations that were of no help. In January 2003, Bush made several claims in his televised State of the Union Address that Saddam had WMD. The claims were largely based on “Curveball’s” highly doubtful testimony to the Germans as well as stories about Saddam obtaining nuclear components from Africa, stories that State Department officials had disproved.

The president never called a cabinet meeting to debate the decision to go to war. He did personally ask Powell whether he (the secretary of state) was

¹⁸ Tyler Drumheller, *On the Brink* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 252.

¹⁹ Quoted in Sidney Blumenthal, “The Pentagon’s Not-So-Little Secret,” <http://www.salon.com>, 8 February 2007.

²⁰ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 92–96.

with him. Ever the loyal soldier, Powell said he was. Powell vividly demonstrated that loyalty on 5 February 2003. Bush had asked him to make a major speech to the United Nations to convince the world that Saddam's WMD justified an invasion. Intelligence material for Powell's speech on 5 February originally came from Cheney's chief of staff, Lewis "Scooter" Libby. The material was so weak that Powell threw most of it out and started over. He spent three days and much of the nights at the CIA working with the agency's director, George Tenet, to put together dependable evidence of Saddam's WMD. For some reason, he did not work closely with any of his own State Department intelligence group, which had severe doubts about the evidence that Cheney, the CIA, and the Defense Department had compiled. "Powell wanted to sell a rotten fish," recalled a top State Department intelligence officer who was outside the process. "He had decided there was no way to avoid war. His job was to go to war with as much legitimacy as he could scrape up."²¹

Powell began his 5 February 2003, UN speech with the words, "My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources."²² As he later admitted, however, a speech that was to provide irrefutable evidence that Saddam's WMD justified an invasion of Iraq turned out to be based on false and misleading information. At the time, Powell seemed to be convinced that the argument was firm enough to justify war. Because of the person who uttered it, the speech made a tremendously favorable impression worldwide. Any American reluctance about supporting the invasion now seemed to disappear. When Powell soon after testified before a U.S. Senate committee, Senator Joseph Biden, a Democrat, only half-jokingly proposed that the secretary of state should be nominated to be president of the United States. Not known to Biden or the public was that key parts of Powell's speech relied on "Curveball's" false testimony and that the day before he spoke, at least one U.S. intelligence agent tried to warn Powell about "Curveball," but the warning was blocked by a top CIA official.

The speech did not perform the necessary magic Bush needed to obtain UN support for an invasion. Following Powell's remarks, the UN inspectors who had been to Iraq laid out their own evidence: they had found no WMD, even though they admitted that many of the governments they represented believed Saddam had such weapons. There simply was no hard evidence. The United States nevertheless began to push for a UN war resolution but then dropped it when Bush realized he did not have the votes in the Security Council. On 19 March 2003, he launched the invasion without UN support.

Powell had lost the great debate of his life. He had helped stack the deck against himself by using information that could not be verified by UN members.

²¹ Sidney Blumenthal, "There Was No Failure of Intelligence," *The Guardian* (London), 5 February 2004.

²² The quote and a good context can be found in Thomas E. Ricks, *FIASCO: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 90–91.

But he lost even more. In 2002, Bush had taken advice from Cheney and others to decide that captured terrorist suspects who were not U.S. citizens would not be protected by international law under the Geneva Conventions, which the United States had ratified decades earlier and which carefully guaranteed humane treatment for prisoners. Led by Powell, U.S. military commanders bitterly protested Bush's decision: "You have to remember that as we treat them, probably so we're [U.S. soldiers who might be captured] going to be treated," a top American general warned.²³

Bush was unmoved. Later, terrorist prisoners facing or enduring torture tried to escape it by making up information and sending Americans down useless dead ends. Stories emerged of U.S. torture and humiliating acts occurring in Iraqi and other prisons. The stories deeply embarrassed the United States and infuriated many Muslims who had once been friendly to Americans. The nation paid heavily after Bush overruled Powell's protests against ignoring the Geneva Conventions.

It again paid heavily when Rumsfeld and Cheney moved to destroy the Powell Doctrine once and for all. They wanted no restraints on the U.S. military or, more accurately, on their power to send the military wherever they wished and under conditions they alone devised. Ten years earlier, Powell had at times stopped President Clinton from using the army by warning that any intervention would require overwhelming force. The political preconditions of the Powell Doctrine, moreover, had to be met. Rumsfeld now undercut Powell by demanding that only a small, high-tech, highly mobile force be sent into Iraq, not an expensive, large force as had been dispatched in 1991. The defense secretary, in other words, did not want to have to care about the Powell Doctrine's political preconditions. Meanwhile, the overwhelming prowar American opinion, led by a Congress and a media that had largely suspended disbelief, met the doctrine's provision demanding domestic support for the troops—or at least this provision was met during the few weeks in 2003 when the invasion and occupation seemed to go well. Nor did Cheney and Rumsfeld worry about the Powell Doctrine's demand for an "exit strategy" once Saddam was toppled. Well-founded newspaper stories reported at the time of the invasion that the United States did not want to exit from Iraq. Bush planned to build four or more major U.S. bases that Washington officials could use to stabilize and democratize the Middle East, protect Israel, and enjoy access to Iraq's giant oil reserves.

"My belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators," Cheney boasted on television three days before the invasion.²⁴ It was not to be. Saddam Hussein went into hiding until he was caught in late 2003, then hanged in 2006. Before he lost power, however, Saddam had supplies of arms and ammunition buried around the country to use in insurgency warfare against the invaders. On 1 May

²³ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 86–87.

²⁴ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 151.

2003, Bush, costumed as a fighter pilot, swaggered across an aircraft carrier's deck and, underneath the sign "Mission Accomplished," informed the world that the war was over. It actually had only begun. By the summer of 2003, the anti-U.S. insurgency claimed increasing numbers of American lives. By late 2006, the number of U.S. dead in action in Iraq exceeded 3,000, or more than the number killed by the September 11 attacks. Al Qaeda members represented only a tiny part of the insurgency, but Iraq was becoming—for the first time—a training base for the terrorist group that had attacked New York City and Washington.

Of paramount importance, the WMD, so trumpeted by Cheney, Bush, Powell, and others, were never found. The WMD did not exist because Saddam, out of fear of U.S. and UN reaction, had in the 1990s destroyed the few WMD weapons he possessed. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, Bush's decision in late 2001 to pull out U.S. troops and area experts so that they could concentrate on Iraq turned out to be a disaster. After 2003, the Taliban began returning in force and taking over parts of the country. Some 22,000 U.S. troops, helped by European and other forces, proved inadequate to handle the Taliban—or the record crops of poppy flowers that were turned into opium for American and European drug users whose money then helped support the Taliban as it killed Americans and their allies. Protected by the Taliban and the mountainous terrain, Osama bin Laden continued to direct al Qaeda from his Afghanistan–Pakistan border hideout.

Bush and many others urged Powell to obtain help from his friends in Europe and Asia. Wolfowitz, like a number of other U.S. officials, had been confident that once Saddam fell, France and others who had opposed the U.S. invasion would be most pleased to help reconstruct Iraq—in return, of course, for access to the country's vast pools of oil. Instead, as the anti-U.S. insurgency expanded and suicide bombers exacted heavy tolls of civilian and military lives, France, Russia, China, and other opponents of the invasion wanted even less to deal with the bloody, deteriorating results. Days before the invasion, Powell was said to be "furious ... at ... Rumsfeld whom he blames in private for making diplomacy difficult by hurling insults at France and Germany, whose good will he [Powell] has been trying to win." One of Powell's friends added, "Diplomacy is slipping away, and Rumsfeld needs some duct tape put over his mouth." Bush and Cheney were never interested in applying the duct tape. The secretary of defense arrogantly dismissed the doubters as "Old Europe." A UN diplomat commented, "If the United States wants to proceed on this unilateral military timetable, they should fight this war alone."²⁵

Rumsfeld and Cheney succeeded in convincing Bush to forget about the Powell Doctrine in 2003, but as the insurgency dragged on, their success helped destroy the efficiency of the U.S. military. By 2004–2005, that military was stretched far beyond its ordinary capabilities. Something had gone wrong

²⁵ Steven R. Weisman, "Powell at a New Turning Point...," *New York Times*, 14 March 2003.

with the neoconservative belief that the great superiority of U.S. military power could democratize the Middle East. Troops who usually took one tour of duty had to endure two and three without the usual rest in between. National Guard forces were summoned so rapidly from individual states to assist the overstretched regular military that Guard commanders warned that their troops were also at the breaking point. Some National Guard soldiers, unprepared for what they found in Iraq, were implicated in the humiliation and torturing of Iraqi prisoners. Meanwhile, attacks on Americans and Iraqis, which had amounted already in June 2003 to some 200 a month, increased nine times over the next year. As inadequate U.S. forces tried unsuccessfully to impose some order, civil war was breaking out. When asked about the insurgents in July 2003, Bush foolishly proclaimed, "Bring 'em on." It was a remark he later regretted.²⁶

Powell continued to be loyal to the president. In a September 2004 speech at George Washington University, he argued that Bush was not guilty of a unilateralist approach but believed in "a strategy of partnerships"—a characterization for which he had little concrete evidence.²⁷ Powell notably lapsed just once. In February 2004, he told the *Washington Post* that since no WMD had been found in Iraq, it "changes the political calculus"—a remark immediately interpreted as meaning the invasion should have not occurred. When this was published, Condoleezza Rice quickly ordered the secretary of state to correct his story. Rice was an extraordinarily weak national security adviser who bore large responsibility for the breakdown of the policy process that Powell was justly criticizing, but he obeyed orders. Shortly after Rice's phone call, he declared, "The president made the right decision," and then repeated that belief three more times.²⁸ Several months later, Anne Applebaum, a Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* journalist, wrote that "Powell is trying to have it both ways, and it is not an attractive picture. Surely true loyalty means not only swallowing your pride when you disagree with your commander in chief, but keeping quiet about it as well, at least while in office.... And if he doesn't want to be held responsible for a policy he dislikes—then he should have resigned a long time ago."²⁹

Still the obedient soldier, Powell stayed through Bush's first term. He resigned only after the White House chief of staff, Andrew Card, called the secretary of state several days after Bush was reelected in November 2004 and said the president wanted to make a change. Bush never contacted Powell. The retired general, as Card ordered, sent his resignation letter to the White House. The president then nominated Rice as secretary of state. When Powell went to see Bush for a farewell call, the conversation was either so trivial or so strained (especially when Powell warned about the worsening of the war in

²⁶ Woodward, *State of Denial*, 229.

²⁷ Glenn Kessler, "Powell Strongly Defends Bush's Foreign Policy," *Washington Post*, 6 September 2003.

²⁸ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 437.

²⁹ Anne Applebaum, "Having It Both Ways," *Washington Post*, 21 April 2004.

Iraq) that the outgoing secretary of state was convinced, as he told a friend, that “the president didn’t know why I was there.”³⁰ In 2000, the Texan, whom Powell then called “Sonny,” had badly needed the greatly respected retired general. Less than five years later, the secretary of state was removed with hardly a political ripple.

Out of office, Powell now admitted that his February 2003 speech to the United Nations would be a “lasting blot” on his record. The WMD he had told the world was in the hands of Saddam Hussein had not existed. “It was painful. It’s painful now.”³¹ He repeatedly charged that the United States went into the war with too few troops to pacify and stabilize Iraq. In other words, he implied that this provision of the Powell Doctrine, not Rumsfeld’s inadequate war and postwar planning, should have shaped the effort. In late 2006 when Iraq was in virtual chaos and civil war waged between Sunni and Shiia Muslims, Powell criticized Bush’s announcement that he was going to inject another 21,000 U.S. troops in a “surge” to try to secure Baghdad and train Iraqi troops. Powell’s criticism mirrored the beliefs of top U.S. military commanders whom the president had overruled so that he could make a final attempt to save one of the most disastrous foreign policy decisions in American history.

But even as he uttered the criticisms, Powell reiterated that he had supported Bush’s decision to go to war in 2003. And publicly he continued to declare that it was the correct decision. After he left office, the old soldier’s loyalty to the presidency continued to trump his better judgment. In 2005, his longtime friend and chief of staff at the State Department, Colonel Larry Wilkerson, condemned Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Rice, especially for ignoring and isolating the former secretary of state. Wilkerson then explained Powell’s puzzling decision to stay in the administration and even (as at the United Nations in 2003) act as its voice by declaring that the retired general “is the world’s most loyal soldier.”³² This form of the loyalty, in these post-September 11 circumstances, not only contradicted Powell’s beliefs of the previous quarter century but specifically contradicted Powell’s Doctrine, which might have saved the United States from a catastrophe.*

³⁰ De Young, “Falling on His Sword.”

³¹ Steven R. Weisman, “Powell Calls His U.N. Speech a Lasting Blot on His Record,” *New York Times*, 9 September 2005.

³² Dana Milbank, “Colonel Finally Saw Whites of Their Eyes,” *Washington Post*, 20 October 2005.

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