

NOVEMBER 30

Colin Powell: Still craven after all these years

Newspapers across the United States and beyond told readers Wednesday about sensational new statements by a former top assistant to Colin Powell when he was secretary of state. After interviewing Lawrence Wilkerson, the Associated Press reported he "said that wrongheaded ideas for the handling of foreign detainees after Sept. 11 arose from a coterie of White House and Pentagon aides who argued that 'the president of the United States is all-powerful,' and that the Geneva Conventions were irrelevant."

AP added: "Wilkerson blamed Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and like-minded aides. Wilkerson said that Cheney must have sincerely believed that Iraq could be a spawning ground for new terror assaults, because 'otherwise I have to declare him a moron, an idiot or a nefarious bastard.'"

Such strong words are headline grabbers when they come from someone widely assumed to be speaking Powell's mind. And as a Powell surrogate, Wilkerson is certainly on a tear this week, speaking some truth about power. But there are a few big problems with his zeal to recast the public record: 1) Wilkerson should have spoken up years ago. 2) His current statements, for the most part, are foggy. 3) The criticisms seem to stem largely from tactical critiques and image concerns rather than moral objections. 4) Powell is still too much of a cagey opportunist to speak out himself.

Appearing on the BBC's "Today" program Tuesday, Wilkerson said: "You begin to wonder was this intelligence spun? Was it politicized? Was it cherry-picked? Did, in fact, the American people get fooled? I am beginning to have my concerns."

So Wilkerson, who was Powell's chief of staff from 2002 till early this year, has started to "wonder" whether the intelligence was spun, politicized, cherry-picked. At the end of November 2005, he was "beginning" to have "concerns."

"Beginning to have my concerns" is a phrase that aptly describes the Colin Powell approach.

Overall, appearances remain key. And so, Wilkerson included this anecdote in his AP interview: "Powell raised frequent and loud objections, his former aide said, once

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yelling into a telephone at Rumsfeld: 'Donald, don't you understand what you are doing to our image?'"

Now there's a transcendent reason to begin to have concerns: Torturing prisoners is bad for "our image."

Rest assured that if the war had gone well by Washington's lights, we'd be hearing none of this from Powell's surrogate. The war has gone bad, from elite vantage points, not because of the official lies and the unrelenting carnage but because military victory has eluded the U.S. government in Iraq. And with President Bush's poll numbers tanking, and Dick Cheney's even worse, it's time for some "moderate" sharks to carefully circle for some score-settling and preening.

In its account of Wilkerson's BBC appearance, the British Guardian newspaper reported Wednesday: "Asked whether the vice president was guilty of a war crime, Mr. Wilkerson replied: 'Well, that's an interesting question – it was certainly a domestic crime to advocate terror and I would suspect that it is ... an international crime as well.' In the context of other remarks it appeared he was using the word 'terror' to apply to the systematic abuse of prisoners."

Strong stuff, especially since it's obvious that Wilkerson is channeling Powell with those statements. But Powell was a team player and a very effective front man for the administration that was doing all that politicizing and cherry-picking – and then proceeding with the policies that Wilkerson now seeks to pin on Cheney as possible war crimes.

White House war makers deftly hyped Powell's "moderate" credibility while the Washington press corps lauded his supposed integrity. Powell was the crucial point man for giving "diplomatic" cover to the Iraq invasion fixation of Bush and Cheney. So, typically, Powell proclaimed three weeks into 2003: "If the United Nations is going to be relevant, it has to take a firm stand."

When Powell made his dramatic presentation to the U.N. Security Council on Feb. 5, 2003, he fudged, exaggerated and concocted, often presenting deceptions as certainties. Along the way, he played fast and loose with translations of phone intercepts to make them seem more incriminating. And, as researchers at the media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate) pointed out, "Powell relied heavily on the disclosure of Iraq's pre-war unconventional weapons programs by defector Hussein Kamel, without noting that Kamel had also said that all those weapons had been destroyed." But the secretary of state wowed U.S. journalists.

Powell's televised U.N. speech exuded great confidence and authoritative judgment. But he owed much of his touted credibility to the fact that he had long functioned

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inside a media bubble shielding him from direct challenge. It might puzzle an American to read later, in a book compiled by the London-based Guardian, that Powell's much-ballyhooed speech went over like a lead balloon. "The presentation was long on assertion and muffled taped phone calls, but short on killer facts," the book said. "It fell flat."

Fell flat? Well it did in Britain, where a portion of the mainstream press immediately set about engaging in vigorous journalism that ripped apart many of Powell's assertions within days. But not on the western side of the Atlantic, where Powell's star turn at the United Nations elicited an outpouring of media adulation. In the process of deference to Powell, many liberals were among the swooners.

In her Washington Post column the morning after Powell spoke, Mary McGrory proclaimed that "he persuaded me." She wrote: "The cumulative effect was stunning." And McGrory, a seasoned and dovish political observer, concluded: "I'm not ready for war yet. But Colin Powell has convinced me that it might be the only way to stop a fiend, and that if we do go, there is reason."

In the same edition, Post columnist Richard Cohen shared his insight that Powell was utterly convincing: "The evidence he presented to the United Nations – some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail – had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them. Only a fool – or possibly a Frenchman – could conclude otherwise."

Inches away, Post readers found Jim Hoagland's column with this lead: "Colin Powell did more than present the world with a convincing and detailed X-ray of Iraq's secret weapons and terrorism programs yesterday. He also exposed the enduring bad faith of several key members of the U.N. Security Council when it comes to Iraq and its 'web of lies,' in Powell's phrase." Hoagland's closing words sought to banish doubt: "To continue to say that the Bush administration has not made its case, you must now believe that Colin Powell lied in the most serious statement he will ever make, or was taken in by manufactured evidence. I don't believe that. Today, neither should you."

On the opposite page the morning after Powell's momentous U.N. speech, a Washington Post editorial was figuratively on the same page as the Post columnists. Under the headline "Irrefutable," the newspaper laid down its line for rationality: "After Secretary of State Colin L. Powell's presentation to the United Nations Security Council yesterday, it is hard to imagine how anyone could doubt that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction."

Also smitten was the editorial board of the most influential U.S. newspaper leaning

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against the push for war. Hours after Powell finished his U.N. snow job, the New York Times published an editorial with a mollified tone – declaring that he “presented the United Nations and a global television audience yesterday with the most powerful case to date that Saddam Hussein stands in defiance of Security Council resolutions and has no intention of revealing or surrendering whatever unconventional weapons he may have.”

By sending Powell to address the Security Council, the Times claimed, President Bush “showed a wise concern for international opinion.” And the paper contended that “Mr. Powell’s presentation was all the more convincing because he dispensed with apocalyptic invocations of a struggle of good and evil and focused on shaping a sober, factual case against Mr. Hussein’s regime.”

Later, in mid-September 2003, straining to justify Washington’s refusal to let go of the occupation of Iraq, Colin Powell used the language of a venture capitalist: “Since the United States and its coalition partners have invested a great deal of political capital, as well as financial resources, as well as the lives of our young men and women – and we have a large force there now – we can’t be expected to suddenly just step aside.”

Now, after so much clear evidence has emerged to discredit the entire U.S. war effort, Colin Powell still can’t bring himself to stand up and account for his crucial role. Instead, he’s leaving it to a former aide to pin blame on those who remain at the top of the Bush administration. But Powell was an integral part of the war propaganda machinery. And we can hardly expect the same media outlets that puffed him up at crucial times to now scrutinize their mutual history.

*This article includes an excerpt from Norman Solomon’s new book
“War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.”
For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com*