

# War without weapons

By Ray McGovern

tompaine.com | February 5, 2004

**T**oday marks the first anniversary of what history will say was a sad day for our country – the day on which Secretary of State Colin Powell peddled corrupt intelligence to “prove” that Iraq posed a military threat that required a “preemptive” attack.

Now the whole world knows there was nothing to preempt.

Powell’s triumph at the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003, was a pyrrhic victory. Until then, Powell was the only senior U.S. national security official with some residual credibility on Iraq. But he proved to be the martinet, saluting to orders to put his credibility on the line. It has now evaporated under the klieg-lights bathing U.S. weapons-searcher-in-chief David Kay, the only senior official so far to admit that the quest for “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq is a fool’s errand.

In what may have been an eerily subconscious slip, Powell has now used the same words employed by former defense secretary Robert McNamara about Vietnam: “We were wrong, terribly wrong.” Asked by The Washington Post on February 2 whether he would have helped build the case for war had he known that Iraq had no such weapons, Powell said, “The absence of a stockpile changes the political calculus. It changes the answer you get.”

Powell was immediately taken to the White House woodshed and is now dutifully taking the line that – weapons or no – war was still the right decision.

There was hope that Kay’s startling honesty would insinuate itself into administration statements on the implications of the absence of WMD in Iraq. There were early signs, some from Powell himself, that there would be an admission that “mistakes were made,” and that the CIA and its obedient director, George Tenet, would take the fall.

After a week of strategizing, however, Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and White House political guru Karl Rove have again prevailed. They decided to tough it out with a two-pronged strategy: (1) a handpicked “independent” commission and (2) a renewed pledge of allegiance to the faith-based “Rumsfeld Theorem” for intelligence analysis:

**Prong one:** It is easy to imagine a satisfied smirk on the president’s face as he was briefed on the new approach. “I get to launch an unprovoked war on false pretences, to choose the members of the ‘independent commission,’ and to set its terms of reference so wide that the

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missing WMD get lost in the noise. Best of all, I can put off until next year the commission's findings so as not to endanger my re-election. Is this a great country or what!"

**Prong two:** Bush administration spokesmen will brazen it out. This poses a more difficult challenge in the wake of the brief spurt of honesty from David Kay, but it is now clear that the administration intends to fall back on its considerable rhetorical skills and the cooperation of our domesticated mainstream press to make the case that the search for WMD in Iraq is far from over.

As usual, Cheney has set the tone. In a recent interview with National Public Radio, he insisted that inspectors in Iraq may still find WMD:

"It's going to take some additional considerable period of time in order to look in all the cubbyholes and ammo dumps. . . where you'd expect to find something like that."

Others have echoed Cheney's additional claim that it would be premature to make any definitive judgment until "millions and millions of pages" of documents have been translated from Arabic.

Yesterday, the defense secretary, a star debater at Princeton, rang an Orwellian change on the "Rumsfeld Theorem" that stipulates that "the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Rumsfeld told committees in both the House and Senate:

"What we have learned thus far has not proven Saddam Hussein had what intelligence indicated and what we believed he had, but it also has not proven the opposite."

Rumsfeld went on to dismiss without explanation Kay's conclusion that Iraq had no WMD early last year as a theory that is "possible, but not likely."

The commission maneuver is so transparent that the White House will have difficulty dragooning people with genuine independence and integrity to serve. No matter. The administration will press ahead and, if the composition of the 9/11 commission is any indication, this new one will be laden with establishment lawyers and politicians – and, in this case, a smattering of former intelligence officials who can be counted upon to play the game.

Gen. Brent Scowcroft, chair of the president's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, would be hands-down the most qualified candidate for chairman, but he is far too independent to be totally "trustworthy." More likely that job will go to someone like utility Republican infielder Warren Rudman.

Rudman has a long-outdated reputation for hard-knuckle independence and was fortunate enough to team up with Gary Hart on the commission on terrorism. But the last commission he headed distinguished itself by covering up for unconscionable behavior by the Pentagon with respect to the illnesses suffered by troops returning from the Gulf War in 1991. Members of that commission took Rudman to task publicly for forcing conclusions

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desired by the Defense Department.

David Kay noted last week that “almost all” analysts were wrong about WMD, and that there were a few “outsiders” who got it right. We Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity thank him for this additional piece of honesty. Our string of VIPS issuances began with a same-day Memorandum for the president critiquing Powell’s Feb. 5 speech to the United Nations.

We gave Powell an “A” for performance and a “C-” for content. We would have flunked him on content, but we suspected (erroneously, it turns out) that the administration had other evidence against Iraq that was too sensitive to reveal.

In our Feb. 5, 2003, memorandum we told the president:

“The key question is whether Iraq’s flouting of a UN resolution justifies war. This is the question the world is asking. Secretary Powell’s presentation does not come close to answering it.”

VIPS expressly disavowed any pretense that our analysis was “irrefutable and undeniable” – attributes assigned by Powell to his own presentation. We did strongly urge the president to widen the discussion beyond violations of U.N. resolutions. And we closed with a strong appeal to him to look “beyond the circle of advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic.”

We are awaiting an invitation from the White House to designate a representative to serve on the commission. But we are not holding our breath.

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