



THE BLOG

R-E-S-P-E-C-T for Colin Powell

By Marty Kaplan

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Listening to Colin Powell endorse Barack Obama, I had the same divided feelings I did last spring, when I heard him speak at my daughter's high school graduation.

He had come because he knew the family of another senior in the class well enough to accept the invitation. An hour before the students processed in, he graciously posed for a photo with each of them. When he spoke, he was warm, witty and inspirational. The story of his rise — from the South Bronx to four-star general, National Security Advisor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of State — held a classic commencement moral: If a screw-up like me could make it, you privileged and accomplished kids will make it, too, and you'll have a responsibility to give back to society.

Yet I couldn't help recalling that this was the same Colin Powell whose United Nations speech five years earlier had convinced me that invading Iraq was the right thing to do. And not only me, but journalists and columnists and editorial writers around the country, many of whom I respected for their gimlet-eyed sobriety.

As assembled by former *Des Moines Register* editorial page editor Gilbert Cranberg, here are the conclusions about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction that the nation's editorial pages drew from Secretary Powell's speech:

"a massive array of evidence," "a detailed and persuasive case," "a powerful case," "a sober, factual case," "an overwhelming case," "a compelling case," "the strong, credible and persuasive case," "a persuasive, detailed accumulation of information," "the core of his argument was unassailable," "a smoking fusillade . . . a persuasive case for anyone who is still persuadable," "an accumulation of painstakingly gathered and analyzed evidence," "only the most gullible and wishful thinking souls can now deny that Iraq is harboring and hiding weapons of mass destruction," "the skeptics asked for proof; they now have it," "a much more detailed and convincing argument than any that has previously been told," "Powell's evidence . . . was overwhelming," "an ironclad case . . . incontrovertible evidence," "succinct and damning evidence . . . the case is closed," "Colin Powell delivered the goods on Saddam Hussein," "masterful," "If there was any doubt that Hussein . . . needs to be . . . stripped of his chemical and biological capabilities, Powell put it to rest."

Yet as we now know, it wasn't true. Did Secretary Powell know it at the time? As he spoke to the UN Security Council, to the world and to me, did he realize back then that his case was built on falsehoods, exaggerations and rhetorical sleights of hand? Or was it rather (as Condoleezza Rice later put it) that "no one could have known" it was wrong from top to bottom, or (as John McCain later put it) that "every intelligence agency in the world and every assessment" said Iraq had WMD?

It's the Rice/McCain denial that Powell gave Tom Brokaw on "Meet the Press" on Sunday: "I thought the evidence was there.... I regret a lot of the information that the intelligence community provided us was wrong."

But investigations since his UN speech suggest that Secretary Powell misrepresented the intelligence he had and discounted conflicting intelligence he knew about. Some examples:

Bioweapons: Secretary Powell said at the UN, "It took years for Iraq to finally admit that it had produced four tons of the deadly nerve agent, VX. A single drop of VX on the skin will kill in minutes. Four tons. The admission only came out after inspectors collected documentation as a result of the defection of Hussein Kamel, Saddam Hussein's late son-in-law." But Kamel had told both CIA analysts and UN inspectors in 1995 that Iraq had destroyed its entire stockpile of chemical and biological weapons and banned missiles.

Bioweapons factories: Secretary Powell said, "We have firsthand descriptions of biological weapons factories on wheels and on rails," which could make enough anthrax or botulinus toxin "in a single month to kill thousands upon thousands of people." What he didn't say was that the CIA knew that the only firsthand source for this was "Curveball," a defector believed by the German intelligence agents who interviewed him to be a fabricator. Nor that the CIA knew that the two corroborating accounts came from Iraqis who had never had direct contact with the biowarfare trucks and had not claimed to have seen them. Nor that CIA files contained information about another Iraqi defector, an engineer who had worked with Curveball, who specifically denied that they had worked on such facilities. Nor that the only American intelligence official ever to actually meet Curveball, when asked to vet this portion of the upcoming speech, warned his CIA boss that Curveball might not know what he was talking about.

Nuclear weapons: Secretary Powell said "most United States experts" believe aluminum tubes sought by Iraq were intended for use as centrifuge cylinders for enriching uranium for nuclear bombs. "Most?" In 2001, the Energy Department had argued - contrary to the CIA — that the tubes were too narrow, too heavy, and too long to be used in a gas centrifuge, a dissent reported by the Defense Intelligence Agency. Two days before his speech, Powell's own State Department intelligence experts had specifically warned him not to say that the tubes were manufactured to a tolerance "that far exceeds U.S. requirements for comparable rockets," but say it he did.

WMD concealment: Secretary Powell played a recording of an intercepted conversation, in Arabic, between two Iraqi military officers. The English translation he showed on a slide said this: "Clean out all of the areas, the scrap areas, the abandoned areas... Make sure there is nothing there." Yet this is the official State Department translation: On "the possibility there is, by chance, forbidden ammo... inspect the scrap areas and the abandoned areas." The doctored version in the speech is incriminating, but "clean out" is not the same as "inspect," and "make sure there is nothing there" is invented out of whole cloth.

Yes, despite immense pressure from Vice President Cheney and his enforcer, "Scooter" Libby, Powell succeeded in purging the speech of dozens of canards. But the speech he delivered is the same speech that, on the eve of his UN appearance, he reportedly threw into the air and declared, "I'm not reading this. This is bullshit!"

Why did he do it? Was it obedience to his commander-in-chief? Duty? If he knew that arguments remaining in the speech were fatally compromised, and if he knew (as Bush had told him) that putting his own honor on the line was the reason that the country and the world would believe what he said, why didn't he resign instead of delivering it?

I don't know the answer. I also don't know how Dana Perino can look herself in the mirror every morning before going into the White House, or how John McCain can tell David Letterman with a straight face that yes, should there be another 9/11, and McCain were unable to discharge his duties, Sarah Palin would be completely qualified to lead our

country as president. The only explanation that comes to mind is a line in that Aretha Franklin song, "Respect": "I ain't lyin' (just a little bit)."

I'm glad that Colin Powell endorsed Barack Obama, and that in doing so, he said much that needed saying, by someone as credible as him, about John McCain and his campaign. But just as I felt on graduation day last spring, I'm sad that his credibility is compromised by the little bit of lyin' he did for George W. Bush and Dick Cheney at the UN. And I'm furious at myself for falling for it.

(This is my column for the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, where you can email me if you'd like.)

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