

Colin Powell: No Good Samaritan

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Watching retired Gen. Colin Powell cite Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan during Sunday's Memorial Day ceremonies on the Mall in Washington, it struck me that Powell was giving hypocrisy a bad name.

Those familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan and the under-reported behavior of Gen. Powell, resurgent star of the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM), know that the two do not mesh.

Powell's well-documented disregard for those who have borne the brunt of the battle places him in the company of the priest and the Levite - in the Good Samaritan parable - who, seeing the man attacked by robbers on the side of the road, walked right on by.

Sadly, Powell has a long record of placing the wounded and the vulnerable on his list of priorities far below his undying need to get promoted or to promote himself. Powell's rhetoric, of course, would have us believe otherwise.

At the Memorial Day event, Powell hailed our "wounded warriors" from Iraq and Afghanistan as the cameras cut to several severely damaged veterans. Lauding the "love and care" they receive from their families, Powell noted in passing that some 10,000 parents are now full-time care providers for veterans not able to take care of themselves.

It was a moving ceremony, but only if you were able to keep your eye on the grand old flag and stay in denial about thousands of wasted American lives, not to mention tens and tens of thousands of wasted Iraqi lives — as well as many thousands more incapacitated for life — and not ask WHY.

Their former commander in chief, President George W. Bush, argued that the deaths were "worth it." They were casualties suffered in pursuit of a "noble cause."

Some claim that to suggest that those troops killed and wounded were killed and wounded in vain is to dishonor their memory and their sacrifice and to inflict more pain on their loved ones.

But Bush never could explain what the "noble cause" was, despite months and months of vigils by those camping outside the Bush house in Crawford asking that question.

Our hearts certainly go out to the wounded, and to the families of the killed or wounded. But I think that the surest way to dishonor them all is to avoid examining the real reasons for their loss.

Vietnam Pain

I lost many good Army colleagues and other friends in Vietnam. Back then, generals and politicians – the military and civilian leaders who promoted Powell and the careerists like him – helped to obscure the real reasons behind that carnage, too. And that was before the corporate media became quite so fawning.

As the Iraq War drags on and the casualties continue to mount, I feel an obligation to do what I can to help spread some truth around — however painful that may be — for truth is not only the best disinfectant, it is the best protection against such misadventures happening again...and again.

It is only too understandable that only the bravest widows and widowers — and parents like Cindy Sheehan whose son Casey Sheehan was killed in Sadr City on April 4, 2004 — have been able to summon enough courage out of their grief to challenge the vacuous explanations of Bush and people like Powell.

You can see it in microcosm in the Sheehan family. Casey's father, Pat Sheehan, cannot agree that Casey's death was in vain. Pat told me that Casey met an honorable death, since he was sent to rescue comrades pinned down by hostile forces in Sadr City.

No one can be sure what was going through Casey's mind, and only later did it become clear that, rather than "volunteering" for an ill-conceived rescue mission, Casey, a truck mechanic, was ordered onto that open truck by superiors unwilling to risk their own hides. (This is what one of Casey's comrades on the scene later told his mother.)

But let us assume that Casey was nonetheless eager to rescue his comrades. This still begs the question that I asked Pat Sheehan: Why were Casey and his comrades in Iraq in the first place? What was the "noble cause?"

Pat's reaction, or lack thereof, almost made me regret having asked him — almost makes me stop here. Almost.

With ministers, priests and rabbis officiating at funerals of "the fallen" and spinning their own renditions of "Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori" – "it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country" – small wonder that even those who know better choose this escape from reality. There is so much pain out there...and if denial helps, well...

It does not help when it comes to charlatans like Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Powell — the latter now trying to re-establish his poster-boy status with an eagerly cooperative FCM.

Aside from those whose TVs are stuck at Fox News and radios at Rush Limbaugh, fewer and fewer Americans now believe the lingering lies. Even funeral directors and preachers are sparing with the once-familiar rhetoric — used cynically in Washington to facilitate further careless carnage — that these dead "must not have died in vain."

Isaiah on the Mall

Besides the Good Samaritan parable, Powell quoted from Isaiah about bringing comfort to the people, surely Isaiah did not mean this to be done with lies on top of lies. Isaiah was no shrinking violet. He got himself killed for speaking out bluntly against lies that in his time justified the oppression of those on the margins.

I imagine this is what Isaiah would say to us now:

“Hear this, Americans. It is time to be not only sad, but also honest. You must summon the courage to handle the truth, which is this: our young warriors and (literally) countless Iraqis died in vain, and nothing will bring them back — least of all meretricious rhetoric.

“Their sacrifice was in vain, hear? Our task two-fold: (1) care for those killed and wounded and their families; and (2) ensure that the truth gets out, so that a war built on lies will not soon happen again.”

Isaiah, I think, would add that this is also precisely why we owe it to the “fallen” and their families to hold to account those responsible for sending them into battle “on false pretences,” to quote then-Senate Intelligence Committee head, Jay Rockefeller last June.

After a five-year investigation and a bipartisan vote approving the Senate Intelligence Committee report, Rockefeller summed it up: “In making the case for war, the Administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent.” As a result, the American people were led to believe that the threat from Iraq was much greater than actually existed.

There is plenty of blame to go around — to be shared by an adolescent president who liked to dress up and call himself a “war president,” and openly savored presiding over what he called “the first war of the 21st Century.”

Not to mention the power-hungry, sadistic bent of the men he chose to be vice president and secretary of defense.

But there would have been no war, no dead, no wasted bodies, no loved ones for whom to recall Jesus’s parable or recite Isaiah’s words of comfort, if Colin Powell had a conscience — if he had not chosen to “walk right on by.”

Let’s face it; neither the Texas Air National Guard’s most famous pilot nor the five-times-draft-deferred former vice president had the credibility to lead the country into war — especially one based on a highly dubious threat.

They needed the credibility of someone who had worn the uniform with some distinction — someone who, though never in command of a major Army combat unit, had been good at briefing the media while Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the glorious Gulf War in 1991, which most Americans have been led to believe was virtually casualty-free.

Actually, since we are trying to spread some truth around, this is worth a brief digression.

The Casualty-Lite Gulf War

According to Powell’s memoir, *My American Journey*, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Powell, was warned by his British counterpart, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Sir David Craig, about the risks involved in bombing Iraq’s so-called “weapons of mass destruction” installations.

After learning that this was part of the bombing plan, Craig expressed particular worry about release of agents from biological installations: “A bit risky that, eh?”

Powell writes that he told Craig the attendant risk of release was worth it and: “If it heads

south, just blame me.” Powell writes he was “less concerned” about chemical exposures.

He ought NOT to have been less concerned. Just as the war ended, U.S. Army engineers blew up chemical agents at a large Iraqi storage site near Kamasiyah. Some 100,000 U.S. troops were downwind.

Many of those troops are now among the 210,000 veterans suffering from nervous and other diseases — and FINALLY now receiving disability payments for what came to be known as Gulf War Syndrome.

Far from his pre-war “just blame me,” Powell joined Pentagon and CIA efforts to cover up this tragedy. Despite numerous veterans’ pleas for support, Powell, in effect, went AWOL on the issue, never acknowledging his responsibility.

He took no interest and, in effect, made a huge contribution to the unconscionable delay in recognizing Gulf War illnesses for what they are. One out of four troops deployed to the Gulf in 1991 are now receiving the benefits to which they were entitled — no thanks to Gen. Powell.

You didn’t know that? Thank the FCM and its persistent romance with Gen. Powell. Sorry for the digression; just had to get that off my chest.

Useful Uniform

Back to the Bush/Cheney/Rumsfeld quest for someone to sell the attack on Iraq, someone whom the media loved, someone with military credentials who would do what he was told.

Perhaps they had read Powell’s memoir, in which he brags about his subservience to the “wisdom” of those up the line. They needed someone who was not too bright but could be eloquent — someone who was so used to taking orders that he would squander his own credibility for his boss, if the boss would just ask.

Not too bright? Apparently, during the three years between when Powell and I had been instructed at Fort Benning on counterinsurgency, the Army’s understanding of this complicated issue had improved.

Here is what Powell writes in his memoir about how he bought into his superiors’ notion about how to win hearts and minds — what Powell calls “counterinsurgency at the cutting edge”:

“However chilling this destruction of homes and crops reads in cold print today, as a young officer I had been conditioned to believe in the wisdom of my superiors, and to obey. I had no qualms about what we were doing. This was counterinsurgency at the cutting edge. Hack down the peasants’ crops, thus denying food to the Viet Cong...It all made sense in those days.”

“Duty, Honor, Country” is what I remember made sense in those days. That was the watchword for young Army officers in the early Sixties — not supreme faith in the wisdom of superiors and blind obedience. But most of the rest of us did not make it beyond colonel.

Small wonder that the hapless Powell was easy prey for Bush/Cheney/Rumsfeld. They needed him to sell the war to the American people and, indeed, to the rest of the world.

It is hard to fathom what “wisdom” he saw in his superiors decisions; what is clear is that he lacked the courage to challenge them, whether out of blind faith, a highly exaggerated – and dubiously moral – notion of the dictates of obedience, or simple cowardice.

As was his wont, Powell saluted sharply, even though he and his chief of staff, Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, decided that some of the “intelligence” conjured up to fortify his justification for war before the U.N. Security Council on Feb. 5, 2003 was pure “bull—t,” according to Wilkerson.

Powell and his handlers were acutely aware that war would be just weeks away after Powell spoke. One small but significant sign of this was what seemed to me the earliest cover-up of the soon-to-begin attack on Iraq.

It was a literal cover-up, accomplished even before Powell conducted his post-speech press briefing in the customary spot in front of the Security Council wall adorned with a reproduction of Picasso’s famous anti-war painting, Guernica.

That wall hanging had been covered up by another fabric. Some PR person had recognized the impropriety of justifying a new war of aggression against the background of Guernica. As usual with Powell, the speech and press conference went swimmingly, and the gullible or shameless (your choice) FCM was incredibly generous with accolades.

Blame-Shifting

Once it became clear — by mid-2003 — that there were no WMD stockpiles or mobile bio-weapons labs or anything else that had been conjured up in the U.N. speech, Powell smoothly shifted the blame to the CIA, and his fans in the FCM transformed Powell into a noble victim, now tragically suffering from a “blot on my record” for no real fault of his own.

Though it is abundantly clear that then-CIA Director George Tenet and his accomplice/deputy John McLaughlin did play a treacherous role, no CIA director has ever made a secretary of state worth his salt do anything — and certainly not start an unnecessary war.

Besides, it is a safe bet that what was already clear to us Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) was also at least equally clear to Powell. On the afternoon of Powell’s U.N. speech, we formally warned President Bush that the evidence adduced by Powell fell far short of justifying an attack on Iraq and that such an attack would be a huge fillip to terrorism around the world.

And since it was obvious that Powell had thrown in his lot with those rolling the juggernaut to war, we urged the president to “widen the circle of your advisers beyond those 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.”

Why Powell simply saluted, in full knowledge that his imprimatur would grease the skids to a highly dubious war can be debated. It may be as simple as the clues he provided in his memoir about honoring the “wisdom of superiors” and his penchant to obey, even when it made little sense and even when lots of folks would lose their homes and their lives.

Who was the colonel in Vietnam who insisted he was duty bound to destroy a village in order to save it from the communists? Powell was cut from similar cloth, albeit with a

greater sense of subtlety and a much better knack for PR.

In April 2006, Powell admitted to journalist Robert Scheer that top State Department experts never believed that Iraq posed an imminent nuclear threat, but that the president followed the misleading advice of Vice President Dick Cheney and the CIA in making the claim.

It may simply be that by the time other generals promote you to general (the current system) you have distinguished yourself first and foremost by saluting smartly — by obeying and not asking too many questions.

But why Powell acquiesced is less important than THAT he went along. Though perhaps not the brightest star in the galaxy, he surely was aware he was being co-opted, and that he needed not only to bless the war but also to wax enthusiastic about it, in order to remain welcome in the White House.

Surely he had learned something since his days in Vietnam — something about the “wisdom” of superiors, and of blind obedience. He could have said no, but he just did not have it in him to do so.

And Powell’s stature (especially with the FCM) made his blessing of the Iraq War especially valuable to Cheney/Rumsfeld and the war-hungry neocons.

Don’t take my word for it. Take it from the quintessential Republican elder statesman, former Secretary of State James Baker — hero of the Florida escapade that stopped the recount in Florida and, with the help of the U.S. Supreme Court, gave the 2000 election to George W. Bush.

In his book *The War Within*, Bob Woodward wrote: “Powell...didn’t think [Iraq] was a necessary war, and yet he had gone along in a hundred ways, large and small...He had succumbed to the momentum and his own sense of deference — even obedience — to the president...Perhaps more than anyone else in the administration, Powell had become the ‘closer’ for the president’s case on war.”

On Oct. 19, 2008, Tom Brokaw asked Powell about this on “Meet the Press;” Brokaw alluded to Woodward’s revelations and how Baker had grilled Powell when he appeared before the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group. Here’s Brokaw quoting Woodward’s book:

“‘Why did we go into Iraq with so few people?’ Baker asked. ... ‘Colin just exploded at that point,’ [former Secretary of Defense William] Perry recalled later. ‘He unloaded,’ [former White House Chief of Staff and now CIA Director Leon] Panetta added, ‘He was angry. He was mad as hell.’... Powell left [the Iraq Study Group meeting].

“Baker turned to Panetta and said solemnly. ‘He’s the only guy who could have perhaps prevented this from happening.’”

I added the bold, so you wouldn’t miss it.

Powell responded to Brokaw’s question by again pointing his finger at the CIA – “a lot of the information that the intelligence community provided us was wrong” – and then insisting that his war role wasn’t that consequential.

“I also assure you that it was not a correct assessment by anybody that my statements or

my leaving the administration would have stopped" going to war, Powell said.

Unlike the Good Samaritan who went out of his way to help a stranger in trouble, Powell simply looked to his own convenience, carefully protecting his status within the Bush administration and keeping his place at fashionable Washington dinner parties.

Whether he could have stopped the war or not, the truth is that Colin Powell didn't even try. He would not risk his reputation for all those victims – Iraqi and American – who have died or suffered horribly from an unnecessary war.

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