

Here Lies Colin Powell... Legacy of a War Criminal

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Following his death from Covid-19 earlier this week, former US Secretary of State Colin Powell's legacy will be examined by many people for many different reasons. Some will eulogise him as one of America's top diplomats and presidential advisers. Many more, I suspect, will remember him as the man who lied for his country again, and again, and again.

One of the Greek sages, Chilon of Sparta, said we should not speak ill of the dead (what is now the Latin aphorism “De mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum est”), a maxim with which I would generally agree. However, it is precisely because of the dead that I am writing these words.

The dead to which I refer come from many nations around the world; countless men, women and children who left this earth in the absence of mercy, a voice or justice. Millions of others have yet to have any sort of closure or peace due to US militarism, wars, interventions and atrocities over many decades. Powell supported, excused and covered up most of them from Vietnam to the present day.

A [memorial service](#) for General Powell will be held at the Washington National Cathedral in the US capital next month. The so-called great and good will eulogise the first African American to serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and US Secretary of State. My own contribution is not for Powell and the mourners, but for the forgotten survivors who will have been propelled back into very dark places at seeing his name in the headlines this week.

To the Iraqi people, Powell was the man who did the dirty work in arguing the case for a war that created more than a million widows and orphans. Estimates of the [number of dead](#) in Iraq continue to be amended. It was Powell who [stood before the UN](#) on behalf of President George W Bush in February 2003 and spoke with great authority, using photographs to “prove” that Iraq under Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). This was a lie, and he knew it.

A couple of weeks ahead of his speech, some Algerian refugees were arrested for allegedly producing ricin in Wood Green, North London. The British media splashed with the headlines that anti-terror police had uncovered an Al-Qaida cell poised to unleash the deadly poison on an unsuspecting public. The more lurid reports also claimed that the “ricin factory” contained bomb-making equipment. British Prime Minister Tony Blair — another man with a long-distance relationship with the truth — whipped up a frenzy of hysteria claiming that, “This danger is present and real, and with us now.”

Blair was backed up by Powell in his presentation to the UN Security Council; both men were pushing the case for war against Iraq. Powell cited the London “find” gravely as an “Iraq-linked terrorist network”. Despite the fact that the British government’s chemical weapons research facility at Porton Down knew that there was no ricin in Wood Green in early January 2003, Powell went ahead and peddled his lies regardless. Blair and Powell both appear to have ignored the facts. In a nest of vipers, it’s always difficult to separate one snake from another.

Two years later a very different story emerged during the Old Bailey trial of the Algerian refugees: there was no ricin and no sophisticated Al-Qaida plot. Jury foreman Lawrence Archer was so outraged at what emerged during his seven-month odyssey in court that he [co-wrote a book](#) with journalist Fiona Bawdon exposing the lies told by Powell backed up by “shamelessly distorted” words from the British government, media and security agencies.

Powell claimed later [to regret](#) his performance at the UN. That didn’t help the Algerians, though, who were held in a high-security prison for more than two years until the case against them in their [infamous trial by jury](#) collapsed. The US official knew that there was no ricin plot; indeed, that there was no ricin, so what was the white powder in the vial he waved around so dramatically in the Security Council meeting?

To the people of Vietnam, Colin Powell was the soldier who covered up the [war crimes](#) carried out in Mỹ Lai by a unit of US troops who slaughtered 500 civilians. Powell admitted in a 1968 memo that there might have been be “isolated cases of mistreatment”, but in August 1971 he eventually told the truth in a sworn affidavit during the war crimes trial of Brigadier General John Donaldson who, it was alleged, had routinely “killed or ordered the killing of, unarmed and unresisting” Vietnamese civilians from his helicopter.

Powell ingratiated himself in 1985 as a senior assistant to US Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger, when he helped cover up the selling of weapons to Iran so that the Reagan administration could funnel money to the US-backed and funded right-wing Contra counterrevolutionaries in Nicaragua. Weinberger faced five charges related to the so-called Iran-Contra scandal only to be [pardoned](#) by President George H.W. Bush before he could be put on trial. It emerged that Powell took part personally in at least one covert weapons sale in exchange for hostages.

He had his finger in many pies in subsequent years which saw the demise of some dictatorships and the rise of others in US military action in Panama, the Philippines, Somalia, Liberia, Bangladesh, Russia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East.

To the Palestinians — and myself, I must add — Powell will always be the man who was treacherous and duplicitous towards them. He lied about Israel’s massacre of Palestinians in the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) tried desperately to hide one of its many war crimes committed in the occupied West Bank when its soldiers killed at least 52 Palestinians in the refugee camp between 1 and 11 April at the height of the Second (Al-Aqsa) Intifada. Ariel Sharon's cowardly troops would have made a quick exit but for the dilemma of how to cover up the killing of so many people. It's a dilemma that focused the minds of those in charge of so-called Operation Defensive Shield.

As [I wrote in MEMO last year](#),

"[They] decided to enforce a siege so tight that no one, despite global protests, could get past Israel's ring of steel; it was a total lockdown and lasted for weeks while the Israeli government did its best to keep journalists and human rights observers away from the Palestinian city...

"The atmosphere was tense and the UN announced that it was planning to launch an investigation into compelling allegations of Israeli war crimes said to have been committed in the refugee camp. The Israelis did what they do well, and mobilised malleable politicians and government advisers to mislead a gullible media and public."

The then US Secretary of State Powell was brought in to use calm, authoritative tones at a press conference in Jerusalem's King David Hotel, which Zionist terrorists blew up in 1946, killing 91 people and wounding 41 others. The irony wasn't lost on the Palestinians and the watching world.

He claimed to have seen "[no evidence](#)" of a massacre. In last year's article I pointed out: "By 23 April Powell was back in Washington briefing senators: 'Right now, I've seen no evidence of mass graves and I've seen no evidence that would suggest a massacre took place.' He wasn't lying, of course, because he never went to Jenin, so could not have 'seen' the evidence even if he had wanted to."

I was one of the first journalists on the scene, though, and was in the refugee camp in Jenin on the day that the former general presented his less than honest briefing to the world's media. The anger and frustration I felt listening to his lies was probably nothing compared with the feelings of the Palestinians in Jenin who told me how their mothers, wives, children and other relatives had been killed before their eyes. I remember seeing a group of Palestinian women tearing at the rubble with their bare, bloodied hands trying to find the bodies of loved ones. The stench of death was overwhelming. Moreover, while Powell said that he saw "no evidence" of a massacre, Human Rights Watch disagreed, and said so when it published a [hard-hitting report](#) on what happened in Jenin.

The Jacobin online magazine has published a brutally [savage obituary](#) of Powell. "There's Nothing Honourable or Decent About Colin Powell's Long List of War Crimes" was the headline. I and millions like me couldn't agree more. He was buried on Friday morning, but as yet there's no official tombstone. When it is eventually fixed on his grave, it should be very simple: "Here lies Colin Powell – in death as in life".

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