

Leaders vs Managers: The Sad Case of Colin Powell

Colin Powell: staff officer or leader?

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Karen DeYoung's brilliant book, *Soldier*, describes Colin Powell as a disciplined and talented beneficiary of genuine equal opportunity, an effective bureaucrat, a fine staff officer, a cool operator in Washington's political wars, a decent man, and overall an outstanding product of great US institutions. But she also suggests that when those institutions failed -- when the Bush administration took the country to war in Iraq under false pretexts -- Powell did not have the imagination or the leadership to challenge the institutions that had made him.

Powell won the devotion of those below him, with a good instinct for the right word and gesture. He was a moderate Republican member of the realist foreign policy establishment. But that was not the thinking of the president and his most influential advisers, especially Vice president Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who were more intellectually aggressive than Powell and ruthless in undermining Powell, whom they regarded as their chief antagonist. Powell believed that he was winning more than his share of interagency battles, partly because his meteoric rise through the military system that operated in a rational way had been almost untroubled.

According to DeYoung, "past experience was turning out to be a poor guide to the new reality, and Powell was slow to grasp the extent of his -- and the State Department's -- isolation within Bush's national security team." As the administration moved with blind self-confidence toward war in Iraq, Powell slowly became part of the machinery that he thought he was helping to brake, as Powell became entangled in the bureaucratic maneuvering, groupthink and subtle self-deception."

Powell's tactical successes concealed from him his larger strategic defeat. The price of persuading the president to take the case against Iraq to the United Nations in September 2002 was his acquiescence in the use of force, should diplomacy and international pressure fail. Soon, his carefully qualified assessments of the state of Saddam's weapons programs merged into support for the war. This change led directly to the moment for which he will always be remembered: his dramatic speech to the U.N. Security Council on Feb. 5, 2003, vouching for the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, later shown to be almost completely without foundation. After that, the war was inevitable, as was the historical verdict on Powell's tenure in office.

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His entire career would have prepared him to be an excellent secretary of state in a functional administration, and if he had had the good luck to serve under a better president, he might be remembered for that.

But in George W. Bush's cabinet, being a fine staff officer was not enough. Powell used every opportunity to press his case. But he never told Bush not to invade Iraq; out of a lifelong sense of propriety and restraint, he kept his best advice to himself. It never occurred to him that his most urgent and important responsibility might be to resign. In 2003, the country needed someone more than a fine staff officer. It needed a leader.