

Resurrect The Powell Doctrine

The right way to honor Colin Powell is to follow through on the restraint and prudence he couldn't.

Doug Bandow

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There have been callous, even bloodthirsty generals in history. However, in the U.S., diplomats more often seem to be the promiscuous, heedless hawks. It is easier to present war as just another option if one doesn't appreciate what combat entails.

During the Reagan administration, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz publicly battled over the circumstances in which the military should be employed. To the surprise of many people, Weinberger was the more reluctant warrior.

After one of his proposals for military action was blocked, Shultz complained to the defense secretary: "If you're not willing to use force, maybe we should cut your budget." However, Weinberger had much the better of the debate. As anyone with family or friends in the military would agree, he responded: "When we ask our military forces to risk their very lives in such situations, a note of caution is not only prudent, it is morally required."

A similar political battle flared a decade later between Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, America's United Nations ambassador and later secretary of state, and Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and also later secretary of state. Albright, who never found a war she didn't want the American armed forces to fight, complained to Powell: "What's the use of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" His response was simple: "I thought I would have an aneurysm."

She later explained: "What I thought was that we had—we were in a kind of a mode of thinking that we were never going to be able to use our military effectively again." That was a nonsensical comment given the fact that before she took office both Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush had intervened in conflicts militarily. So would President Bill Clinton, whom she served, and later both George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Washington evidently was not much inhibited in its use of force.

Unlike Albright and other inveterate militarists, Powell recognized that the Cold War ameliorated the threat environment facing America and thus reduced the military's role. "I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of villains. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung," he opined in April 1991, as the Soviet Union lurched towards history's eternal trash bin.

He still believed in an active America, just not a promiscuously warlike America. He conceived what became known as the "Powell Doctrine" to keep the U.S. out of unnecessary and especially unwinnable conflicts. Powell set forth eight questions to ask before initiating force:

1. Is a vital national security interest threatened?
2. Do we have a clear attainable objective?
3. Have the risks and costs been fully and frankly analyzed?
4. Have all other nonviolent policy means been fully exhausted?
5. Is there a plausible exit strategy to avoid endless entanglement?
6. Have the consequences of our action been fully considered?
7. Is the action supported by the American people?
8. Do we have genuine broad international support?

His thoughtful queries should be answered before sacrificing American lives, spending scarce financial resources, and ultimately putting the homeland at risk, as well as killing others and ravaging their homes. The first question may be the most important and most violated principle. Washington's War Party considers almost everything vital.

Consider Afghanistan. Once Al Qaeda was smote and the Taliban punished, that country offered but an irrelevant conflict in a distant land surrounded by great powers all with greater interests at stake. Yet Washington treated the conflict as a global crisis requiring decades of war, thousands of (American and allied) lives, and trillions of dollars, while making much of the countryside dangerous to civilians who merely sought to survive.

Powell's other guidelines also are routinely violated. Why is Washington helping Saudi Arabia slaughter Yemeni civilians? Why did the Bush administration blow up Iraq, leaving human debris throughout the Middle East? What impelled the Obama administration to illegally intervene in Libya? And why did the Biden administration threaten war against Iran, promise to fight China over Taiwan, and lobby to bring ongoing conflicts involving Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, all in the same week? Do any of the latter potential wars—big wars, serious wars, costly wars, deadly wars—satisfy Powell's eight conditions?

The War Party is distressed when anyone suggests that force is not the best policy anywhere. Obviously, one can disagree over the nature and importance of interests. However, something much deeper is at issue with promiscuous warmongers—especially the think tank warriors and media conquistadors, the academic bombardiers and chicken hawks.

The most avid proponents of war systematically ignore the cost. Vice President Dick Cheney explained away his five Vietnam War deferments as having "other priorities." Senators Joseph Lieberman, John McCain, and Lindsey Graham cheerfully supped with Muammar Khadafy, discussing potential rewards for his great assistance against terrorism, only to demand

America's entry the moment civil war broke out in Libya. And Graham made the startling claim that war in Korea really wouldn't be so bad because it would be "over there" rather than "over here." Odious does not come close to describing such people, for whom the lives of others mean so little.

Consider Albright's perspective. Her assumption of omniscience was widely shared in Washington, and sped America toward disaster: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America: We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us." It was a ludicrous claim even in the seeming halcyon days after the Soviet Union's demise. However, today, after a couple decades of disastrous regime change wars, the only proper response is wild, uproarious, and contemptuous laughter.

Indeed, she knew her certitude was deadly. When queried about estimates of a half million dead Iraqi children result of economic sanctions, she didn't dispute the number, instead insisting that "we think the price is worth it." Never mind the public relations catastrophe in her admission. What did she believe was achieved at such a high human cost? We see much the same policy today, with starvation sanctions applied to countries such as Venezuela and Syria. These two regimes are ugly but unlike Iran or North Korea don't even rhetorically threaten America or their neighbors. However, U.S. policymakers do not care, imperiously determined to force regime change by starving the very victims of oppression.

Powell didn't opine on the promiscuous use of sanctions, which exploded after his time in government. Yet economic warfare can be as deadly as combat. Britain's naval blockade in World War I killed hundreds of thousands of German civilians; far more Yemenis have died from war-induced starvation and disease than directly from combat. The "Powell Doctrine" should be applied to use of economic sanctions as well as military force.

As my friend and former colleague Chris Preble, now at the Atlantic Council, explained, "Powell understood that the nation's grand ambitions needed to be tempered by reality. In that sense, he followed in the footsteps of a number of other great strategic thinkers from the twentieth century—from Walter Lippman and Reinhold Niebuhr to George Kennan and Brent Scowcroft, whom Powell worked with on a number of occasions over the course of both men's illustrious careers." This recognition of reality, rooted in human nature and experience, should infuse the entire foreign policymaking process.

Alas, Iraq was Powell's moment and he failed to meet it. The great tragedy of his career was that when his cautious, measured approach to military action—he only looked like a pacifist compared to today's political kettle of mindless hawks—was most needed, he abandoned it. Powell sold George W. Bush's and Richard Cheney's plan to take America into the Iraqi imbroglio.

The war was based on lies and misstatements. The conduct of the occupation was arrogant, ignorant, and deadly. The cost to occupiers and occupied alike was hideous. Thousands of dead Americans and allied personnel; tens of thousands of wounded, many grievously. Hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis. Millions displaced. Religious minorities robbed, kidnapped, raped,

murdered, and driven into exile. The genesis of Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State. Increased influence for Iran. Yet after all this, most of its proponents refused to recant, remaining unapologetic for the enormous destruction, human and material, that they wrought.

Why did Powell fail? He was no radical. Comfortable with American predominance, supportive of expansive alliances, and prepared for war, he advocated an active role in the world. Shortly after the U.S.S.R.'s demise, he wrote: "We can see more clearly today that danger has not disappeared from the world." He argued that "U.S. ground troops in Europe are still vital. Although far fewer troops will be necessary, now that the Warsaw Pact has dissolved, America needs enough troops to meet its commitments." He didn't want the armed services to shrink too fast: "We cannot tell where or when the next crisis will appear that will demand the use of our troops."

The times also played a role. Noted the Atlantic Council's Emma Ashford: "His compelling vision of constrained U.S. military power, forged during the Vietnam War, was out of step with a post-Cold War zeitgeist that saw America as the 'indispensable nation.'" Similar was the explanation of the Quincy Institute's Andrew Bacevich:

The prevailing mood in Washington after the Cold War and following Desert Storm had little patience with self-imposed constraints. By the time Powell retired from active duty in the autumn of 1993, senior officials and pundits eager to put American armed might to work were already chipping away at his eponymous doctrine. Military activism in places like Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans, along with sparring in the Persian Gulf, was becoming the order of the day.

Powell was of course powerless to stop Bush's war. But he seemed to work unduly hard to believe the intelligence lies fed him. Ashford speculated that the emerging world of proliferation and terrorism undermined his certainty, causing him to accept "the need for a foreign policy more assertive than his instincts suggested."

However, that was only his first mistake. He quickly realized that he had been misled, manipulated, and used. That was the moment he should have done something common in Europe but much rarer in America: resign.

It would not have saved the U.S. from the impending catastrophe of war. But doing so might have caused at least some of those responsible to be held accountable. The president who failed so completely might have been defeated. Myopic presidential aides and appointees, surfeit with hubris, might have been denied future office, passed over by think tanks, rejected by investment firms, and ignored by the media. And the next time the usual suspects proposed that the U.S. stage another mindless murderfest, say Libya or Yemen, policymakers might have dismissed the idea. Lives and money might have been saved. And America's reputation as well as his own might have been salvaged.

Colin Powell was a good soldier disinclined to challenge an establishment gone rogue. Perhaps public rebellion was too much to ask of him. However, it ensured that he remained a minor

figure with marginal influence. We must await others to eventually rediscover the American republic and transform U.S. foreign policy accordingly.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.