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Colin Powell: Willful Victim of the Central Intelligence Agency's Deceit



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“Don’t worry, it’s a slam dunk”

—CIA director George Tenet, December 21, 2002. (Tenet’s response to President Bush’s demand for intelligence on Iraq’s WMD to provide to the American people.)

“The Truth Will Set You Free.”

—Biblical inscription in the lobby of CIA headquarters.

For nearly two decades, former secretary of state Colin Powell lived with the deceitful role he played in helping the Bush administration make its dishonest case for war against Iraq. Powell ignored the warnings from his chief of staff and the director of his Bureau of

Intelligence and Research, not to allow the CIA to prepare his speech for the United Nations in February 2003. Vice President Dick Cheney wanted Powell to deliver a speech to convince the American public and an international audience that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Powell believed he could deal with the CIA, just as he believed he had dealt with Vice President Cheney's efforts to prepare his speech. The Cheney draft of a speech, written by his chief of staff, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, was a total distortion, and Powell ignored it. But Powell was no match for the manipulation of CIA director George Tenet and deputy director John McLaughlin. They lied to him, and he never forgave them.

Tenet and McLaughlin played key roles from September 2002 to March 2003 in manufacturing intelligence to support a decision to go to war. They gave deceitful briefings to various congressional committees; they sponsored a specious National Intelligence Estimate in October 2002; they instigated an unclassified "White Paper" on the basis of the estimate to distribute on Capitol Hill before the vote to authorize force; and they assisted Cheney's desires. Powell knew that Cheney had made numerous trips to the CIA to make sure that the intelligence would corroborate Bush's decision to go to war. Tenet and McLaughlin lied to Powell in claiming there were multiple sources for sensitive information, but McLaughlin, an intelligence veteran of 32 years, was the ring leader of the campaign. McLaughlin perverted the intelligence process, and tried to silence the chief of the Iraq Survey Group, David Key, who knew there was no evidence of strategic weaponry in Iraq. McLaughlin was the key advocate for the notorious "Curveball," whose phony intelligence on mobile biological weapons was a key element in Powell's speech six weeks before the start of the war.

Powell's speech and the CIA were wrong on every aspect of Iraqi WMD—nuclear, biological, and chemical. Fabricated information and single-source intelligence were central to the process. The "Curveball" saga on non-existent mobile biological labs symbolized the corruption of the campaign.

"Curveball" was the brother of a senior aide to Ahmad Chalabi, who led the Iraqi dissident effort to feed disinformation to the U.S. government and the mainstream media, particularly Judith Miller of the *New York Times*. There was no reason to give any credibility to Curveball's information because the Iraqi factories producing anthrax and botulinum toxin had been destroyed in Desert Storm. Curveball was handled by German intelligence and never vetted by the CIA, but the Germans warned that they could not vouch for him because he was a liar and an alcoholic. The chief of the CIA's European

Division, Tyler Drumheller, knew Curveball was mentally unstable and that he was trying to trade bogus information to the Germans for immigration status for himself and his family.

Drumheller warned CIA leadership that Curveball's information was false after it was cited in the tainted national intelligence estimate in October 2002. But Alan Foley, the chief of WIN-PAC, the weapons intelligence center, was determined to provide George W. Bush with the case for war, and refused to yield on rejecting the mobile labs story. Drumheller was particularly dumbfounded when Bush used the disinformation in his State of the Union address on January 28, 2003. So were senior members of the German Federal Intelligence Service (BND).

When Drumheller received the draft of Powell's UN speech, he importuned McLaughlin to drop the story. According to Powell's chief of staff, Larry Wilkerson, he and the secretary were suspicious of the material because there were no photographs of the labs, but Tenet and McLaughlin falsely insisted there were multiple sources. The night before the speech, Drumheller made a final attempt to appeal to Tenet to delete the Curveball information, but Tenet brushed him off. Several months later, Tenet worked up the courage to tell Powell that the Curveball story was a sham.

If Powell actually wanted accurate information on the Curveball concoction or any aspect of Iraqi weaponry, he could have gotten it elsewhere in the intelligence community. A senior military officer such as Powell had to know that Iraq's aluminum tubes were not compatible with a nuclear weapons program. The Department of Energy and the Department of State's intelligence bureau were confident that the tubes were for Iraqi artillery. Saddam Hussein, moreover, made no attempt to hide Iraq's purchases of the tubes. But there was one CIA analyst, a relatively junior analyst referred to as "Joe," who determined the tubes were evidence of a reconstituted nuclear program.

In May 2004, I challenged Tenet at Georgetown University about his role in the CIA's disinformation campaign. His response was: "When the facts are all in, we will neither be completely right nor complete wrong." Several British and Australian intelligence officers resigned over their own governments' use of this material. No one at CIA resigned, and Tenet and McLaughlin insisted that the "integrity of our process was maintained throughout and any suggestion to the contrary is simply wrong."

In September 2004, following the retirements of Tenet and McLaughlin, the CIA finally conceded that the so-called labs were in fact mobile hydrogen units for weather balloons. This is exactly what Saddam Hussein claimed in his account of Iraqi weaponry in

December 2002, an account that was roundly dismissed by the Bush administration and the CIA and also by Colin Powell.

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