

# The Academy of Political Science

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## Book Reviews

**Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell** by Karen DeYoung. New York, Knopf, 2006. 610 pp. \$28.95.

The first half of the *Washington Post* reporter Karen DeYoung's biography of Colin Powell goes over much the same ground as Powell's 1995 engaging and informative autobiography, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House). The remainder of her book makes a much more fundamental contribution by drawing on the author's extensive on-the-record interviews with Powell, as well as other sources, to recount his often bruising experiences as Secretary of State. DeYoung's book is also of interest for the light it sheds on the inner workings of the George W. Bush presidency.

The policy-making process Powell experienced in the Bush administration was a near antithesis of a multiple advocacy decision-making process in which a wide range of clearly posed options are subjected to rigorous debate in the presence of the chief executive. The Bush presidency was a bureaucratic battlefield in which back-channeling and end runs were the norm, and policy outcomes were a function of bureaucratic politics and ideological affinity rather than of the merits of the policies under consideration. The result was a state of affairs in which Powell and the State Department were marginalized, and the hawkish views of Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld regularly prevailed.

The outflanking of Powell was well under way in the first year of the Bush presidency. On 13 March 2001, Powell received an urgent request from National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to comment on a public letter to a group of congressional opponents of an agreement that had been drafted by the Vice President's office for Bush's signature. The letter put the President on the record as opposing mandatory restrictions on global emissions. Powell raised no objection to the proposed policy, but urged that the letter include a passage reassuring the nation's allies that the United States would continue to work with them on climate control, providing Rice with a suggested wording. When she informed him that his suggestion "didn't make it" into the letter, Powell hurried to the White House to argue his case in person, only to find that the communication had already been personally taken to Capitol Hill by Vice President Cheney.

"Powell took the sequence of events as a warning about the Bush administration's decision-making process," DeYoung writes. There was nothing in

the Bush process comparable to the formal options papers Powell had prepared for Ronald Reagan during his time as National Security Advisor. Nor was there anything resembling the “less formal but decisive” policy discussions between George H.W. Bush and his senior advisors in the Oval Office or the lengthy National Security Council debates in the administration of Bill Clinton. “In this administration,” DeYoung remarks, “presidential decisions seemed to come out of the ether” (pp. 328–329).

There was a second such episode in the opening days of 2002. The topic was the status of al Qaeda and Taliban members captured in Afghanistan. Negotiations were under way between the legal staffs of the State and Justice Departments on whether they should be accorded prisoner-of-war status. The State Department argued that the captives were guaranteed that status by the Geneva Conventions, whereas the Justice Department held that the Geneva rules did not apply to the prisoners because they were “illegal combatants.” The debate was still ongoing and Powell was on a trip to Asia when the White House approved the Justice Department’s position. “Once again,” DeYoung comments, “the president’s decision on a matter of international importance seemed to have materialized out of thin air; there had been no high-level meeting or debate over prisoner treatment, and Bush had apparently ruled without full consideration of the issue” (p. 369).

The months following this episode were marked by a seeming march toward war with Iraq. In his State of the Union Address in late January, Bush declared that his administration would not “wait on events, while dangers gather” and included Iraq in what he referred to as “an axis of evil.” In his June 1 West Point commencement address, Bush went on to enunciate a more fully developed doctrine of preemptive war. Meanwhile, there was a drumbeat of assertions by the Vice President, the Secretary of Defense, and their subordinates about the imminent danger posed by Iraq, which, they insisted, possessed weapons of mass destruction that it might well put to use. Powell, however, held that the regime of Saddam Hussein was being successfully contained and viewed the use of force as a last resort.

Early in August, it became Powell’s turn to engage in a bureaucratic end run. To counter the pressure of administration hard-liners for military action against Iraq, he arranged with Rice to meet privately with Bush and argue the case for diplomacy. In what ultimately proved to be only a tactical victory, he persuaded Bush to seek a United Nations resolution requiring Iraq to permit arms inspectors to search the country. In November, such a resolution was voted by the UN, and Iraq agreed to open itself to inspection (pp. 401–402). But when the early inspections failed to turn up evidence of weapons of mass destruction, there was renewed pressure within the administration for an invasion of Iraq.

In January 2003, Bush called Powell into the Oval Office and said, “I really think we are going to have to take this guy out.” As Powell pointed out, Bush had made the decision to go to war without a meeting in which the relevant

members of his administration debated their positions (p. 429). Moreover, despite Powell's qualifications as the architect of the 1991 Gulf War and a former National Security Advisor and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, there also was never a point at which he was asked for his considered views on the matter. And for all of his skepticism about military intervention, Powell was called upon to make the case before the Security Council that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. He did so with impressive fluency, drawing on the most persuasive intelligence then available, but no such weapons have ever been found.

This is a fascinating and instructive work, but it must be mined by the reader to yield some of its most interesting implications. It would have profited from a less exclusive focus on individual events and greater attention to their larger context. It also would have been helpful if DeYoung had quoted more extensively from her interviews with Powell. For example, in a key concluding passage on Powell's code of organizational loyalty and its implications for his failure to advance his views more effectively, it is not clear whether DeYoung is paraphrasing assertions Powell made to her or presenting her own views of his seeming convictions (p. 516). Finally, the book might well have concluded with a sustained discussion of the relationship between Powell the man and his performance in the Bush administration. A tantalizing clue is provided in a 1960 military performance evaluation DeYoung unearthed on the 23-year-old Lieutenant Colin Powell: "He expresses his opinions quietly and convincingly. If his recommendation is not accepted, then he cheerfully and promptly executes the decision" (p. 37).

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**Why Leaders Choose War: The Psychology of Prevention** by Jonathan Renshon. Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 2006. 240 pp. \$49.95.

Will fear of North Korean or Iranian nuclear weapons development result in preventive or preemptive military strikes by the United States or others? If preventive war is based on a perception that an adversary cannot be deterred, will the "war on terror" result in an increasing number of preventive actions by more countries? Or have the costs of the Iraq war dampened optimism about their efficacy? Jonathan Renshon's timely and important analysis sheds light on these questions by focusing on the beliefs and psychology of leaders. He refutes realist accounts of decision making based on objective assessments of relative military capability alone, and shows how leaders particularly matter in explaining decisions regarding preventive action or war, since the information on which such decisions are based—information about an adversary's potential actions in the future—is by nature limited and ambiguous.

To delineate the factors that influence decisions about preventive war, Renshon compares three cases in which leaders used force in a preventive