

How Colin Powell Plays the Game

The general is everybody's dream candidate: more pleasant than Dole, more eloquent than Gramm, more stable than Perot. But judging from his record, is Powell really the man to shake up the capital?

BY JON MEACHAM

On one of the first days of 1991, as U.S. troops massed near the Saudi/Kuwaiti border, Stephen Solarz's telephone rang in his Capitol Hill office: General Colin Powell was on the line. Solarz, then a New York congressman, had just written a long article for *The New Republic* making the case for war in the Persian Gulf. At the time, President Bush was trying to build support for the use of force against Saddam Hussein; congressional hearings were underway, and with Senator Sam Nunn and two former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)—Admiral William Crowe and General David Jones—publicly arguing to give economic sanctions more time, Solarz was a key Democratic hawk. The Powell call was brief but kind, a valentine about the magazine piece. "He was very generous and congratulated me on it," Solarz recalled recently. "But then I read in subsequent books that he was actually opposed to the points I was arguing, so I'm not sure what to make of that."

Solarz's mystification makes sense. According to Bob Woodward's book *The Commanders*, for which Powell was a major source, the general had reservations about going to war, favoring a containment strategy. Yet, once Bush decided to fight, it was Powell's job as chairman (the principal military advisor to the president) to carry out the wishes of his civilian boss. That Powell, an officer with a high sense of duty, did this is not at all surprising. What is striking about Powell around this time is how adroitly he cast himself as a member of the winning war party within the administration.

Hence the stroke call to Solarz; blind accounts in magazines and newspapers about Powell's eagerness and toughness; and his appearance with Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney before the Senate Armed Services Committee on December 4, 1990. There, he took on those such as Nunn, Crowe, and Jones, who believed that sanctions or limited air strikes could force Iraq out of Kuwait. "Many experts, amateurs and others in this town believe that this can be accomplished by such things as surgical air strikes, or perhaps a sustained

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air strike. And there are a variety of other nice, tidy, alleged low-cost, incremental, may-work options that are floated around with great regularity all over this town," Powell said. "Those strategies may work, but they also may not. Such strategies are designed to *hope* to win. They are not designed to win."

For Powell to be this dismissive of a position for which he had had such sympathy indicates that the general had decided not only to carry out his duty but also to carry political water for Bush. This was a tough Washington hand to play, but Powell did it beautifully. By the end of the war, he had, in the words of *U.S. News & World Report*, restored "the public's faith in its fighting force." People like Crowe and Jones were discredited, and Powell, who had privately told them—but never Bush—that he was on their side, came up a national hero, "America's Black Eisenhower" (as *National Review* dubbed him).

Now the Powell-for-President drumbeat is sounding throughout the land. In an October *Newsweek* cover story, Joe Klein wrote this of the general: "He stands, at 57, as the most respected figure in American public life. He is an African-American who transcends race; a public man who transcends politics. He seems a distinctly *American* character, with an easy confidence that inspires trust even among the most skeptical." R.W. Apple, Jr., in *The New York Times*, called Powell "a coveted general" in a page-one story about competing GOP and Democratic hopes to claim him as one of their own; in the *Los Angeles Times*, James Pinkerton published a column headlined "Colin Powell: A President for All Seasons."

Implicit in speculation about Powell's potential as a dream candidate is that he is somehow not of Washington, a figure (as Klein put it) who "transcends politics." His poll numbers reflect his popularity: 58 percent of Americans view him favorably and a phenomenally low 6 percent unfavorably (compare that to Bill Clinton's 41 percent negative rating in the same recent NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey). And a *Newsweek* poll found that 54 percent believe it's a plus that Powell "has no ties to politics as usual."

Powell, however, operates in Washington as shrewdly and capably as anyone in modern memory. He has held a string of some of the

most prestigious and important posts in the capital—White House Fellow, military assistant to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, national security advisor to President Reagan, JCS chairman under Bush. "It was very clear early on that the advice and counsel he brought were more political than you might have expected from a man who's been in the military," recalls Tom Griscom, Reagan's director of communications from 1987 to 1988, when Powell was at the National Security Council. Margaret Tutwiler, James Baker's longtime aide, says Powell "knows how to work the departmental and interagency process." And the general was very helpful to prominent reporters, from Woodward on down. "He was clearly the guy to go to at the Pentagon, of all the civilians and all the officers, if you wanted direction on a story," says NBC News' Fred Francis, who covered the Pentagon from 1984 to 1993. "He was not a leaker in the traditional sense, but he wouldn't let you broadcast a bad story and if you already had information, he would generally confirm it. He always made himself available."

People who know Powell universally salute his efficiency, sense of humor, and ability—rare in a city seemingly dedicated to spinning its wheels—to get things done. "Weinberger was sometimes a difficult man to deal with, so I used to go to Colin," recalls Lawrence Korb, a former assistant secretary of Defense, of Powell's days as military assistant. "He's got a photographic memory, handles pressure very well, and is able to make things happen. It's a very rare combination."

At the moment, Powell has not only not announced whether he will run for president but also has yet to say officially whether he is a Republican, a Democrat, or something in between. "Nobody knows," claims Weinberger. For three decades, however, Powell's political patrons have been Republicans (Weinberger, Frank Carlucci, Reagan, and Bush); his best friends are former assistant secretary of Defense Richard Armitage (to whom Powell spoke by telephone every morning at 5:30 or 6:00 a.m. during the Reagan and Bush administrations) and Kenneth Duberstein, Reagan's last chief of staff; and his outlook seems generally conservative. During the 1988-89 presidential transition, for example, Powell wrote a *New York Times* op-ed titled

“Why History Will Honor Mr. Reagan.” For Republicans, fresh from their historic mid-term thrashing of Clinton and the Democrats, the partisanship of Gingrich and Dole may wear thin by 1996—which could mean that the GOP will move not to a presidential nominee such as Dole or Phil Gramm but will instead try to recruit a figure of national unity to head the ticket, leaving congressional Republicans to play hardball on the Hill. And about the only figure of national unity with Republican leanings is Colin Powell. Alternatively, from Powell’s point of view, the GOP’s gains in November may prompt him to embrace the Republicans and run as a moderate who can bridge the gaps in the party. Or there is yet another scenario: Powell could bypass traditional politics altogether and run as an independent.

Who is Powell? is the question animating Washington political chat these days. In a way, there seem to be two: Powell the rhetorical critic of domestic culture and Powell the military man. Oddly, the better of these seems to be the domestic thinker, the one we supposedly know the least about. Powell’s vision of the country—formulated during his meritocratic rise in the military—is affecting. “I am where I am today because the Army takes care of its own,” Powell said in his farewell address as JCS chairman. “I was allowed to rise based on performance.” In a remarkable 1989 piece for *The Washington Times* on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday, Powell movingly endorsed the civil rights movement that had taken shape in the summer of 1963 while he was overseas and his young family was living in Birmingham, his wife’s hometown. Powell had returned home at Christmas from duty as a military advisor to the South Vietnamese army. “I was stunned, dis-

heartened, and angry. While I had been fighting in Vietnam alongside brave soldiers trying to preserve their freedom, in my own land a long-simmering conflict had turned into an open fight



Mr. Inside: Powell with Reagan, Weinberger, Crowe, Carlucci, and Duberstein

in our streets and cities—a fight that had to be won.”

He went on to articulate what could be the thematic outlines of a Powell presidency, one that rightly challenges both conservative and liberal assumptions. (It is a sensibility, ironically, very much like Clinton’s, against whom Powell might run in 1996.) “Martin’s vision was that the day would come when all Americans would someday sit together at the table of brotherhood. . . . We are not there yet. Martin would see that institutional racism is still a part of our society. He knew that character and ability are formed in the home and in the school. If he were alive today, he would be working hard to strengthen the black family. He would not be satisfied with education systems that still do not prepare our young people to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. I am sure he would have as a major goal a quality education for all Americans. He would also be determined to provide a good job for every American as a solution to underlying causes of second-class citizenship.”

White House Photo

Powell could well be a candidate, like Clinton in 1992 and Robert Kennedy in 1968, able to unite whites and blacks, affluent and poor, with an explicit call for mutual responsibility. He could successfully argue that the country owes the little guy a hand up, and the little guy in turn owes the country discipline and hard work. These issues are inevitably charged with race, and Powell could, on the only-Nixon-could-go-to-China principle, be the leader who finally talks straight to minorities about work, crime, and self-pity. In fact, he already has. At the time of the Los Angeles riots in 1992, during a commencement address at the predominantly black Fisk University in Nashville, Powell said, "Let the fact that you are black or yellow or white be a source of pride and inspiration to you. Draw strength from it. Let it be someone else's problem, but never yours. Never hide behind it or use it as an excuse for not doing your best."

Like Eisenhower, who understood the American people's need for a dignified leader, Powell knows how to conduct himself; he was a powerful, quiet presence briefing the country on the Gulf War and the Carter mission to Haiti. Remember, too, how self-assured and, well, *presidential* he seemed the Saturday evening in June 1993 when he and then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin publicly explained the bombing of Iraq in retribution for the alleged assassination plot against George Bush? The merits of the operation aside, Powell, in his Army green and bright decorations, was the grown-up; Aspin looked rumped and out of his league in a khaki poplin suit.

Of course, the presidency is also about solving problems, and one rationale for a Powell candidacy would be that here's the man who ran the Gulf War; why not give him a shot at health care, inner city schools, the deficit? Surely, this line of thinking goes, the general can't do any worse than those who have gone before. This argument will be familiar to anyone who remembers presidential boomlets for figures such as Douglas MacArthur, Ross Perot, and Lee Iacocca.

The problem with thinking of Powell as a savior who will throw the money changers out of the Washington temple is that for a long time he has been one of the money changers. This is the second Powell, and the lesson of his public

life is that he is a consensus seeker, a man who wants everyone on board before he moves. The general's common denominator, from giving each service roughly the same budget to defending troubled weapons systems on behalf of the Pentagon, is the search for the thing surest not to upset the status quo. The most famous example of this characteristic is the Powell Doctrine, which holds that the U.S. should only deploy military force in overwhelming numbers and in favorable climes so that our side is virtually guaranteed victory. Applications of the doctrine mean that going into desert combat, with heavy armor and air superiority, is good; fighting in jungles (as in Vietnam) or mountains (as in Bosnia) is more difficult, because determined guerrillas could wear U.S. troops down, and should therefore be avoided.

While caution in deploying troops can save lives, Powell's parallel characteristic—the urge for political consensus—is demonstrably less desirable when it comes to brokering the claims of competing special interests (in his case, among the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps). Making tough calls is what sensible Americans should want a president to do, and Powell already has a substantial record, one that is less about knocking heads together than it is about log-rolling. If he runs for national office, this record should be on the table. Should he not run, we can still learn from his career how even the ablest, most extraordinary men—the general is surely one of these—have trouble overcoming those forces in Washington that encourage inertia.

A Soldier's Story

To understand Powell, you first have to understand where he comes from. The son of Jamaican immigrants, Powell grew up in the South Bronx in the forties and fifties, years when the neighborhood was middle class and racially and economically mixed. Powell got ahead in life by dint of two institutions: City College of New York and the Army's ROTC. Graduating from CUNY in 1958, Powell began his career as a second lieutenant and served two tours in Vietnam. There, he rescued his commanding officer from a burning helicopter; in

1969, he graduated second in his class at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. Back in the U.S., in 1972, he was stationed in Washington, getting a master's degree in business administration at George Washington University when he was selected as a White House Fellow—and his career took off.

White House Fellows are young lawyers, military officers, business executives, and aspiring politicians selected to spend a year working in the executive branch. Alumni include Henry Cisneros, Robert McFarlane, Tim Wirth, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and CNN president Tom Johnson. Powell won one of the precious slots and was quickly picked up by Weinberger and Carlucci, who were then at Nixon's Office and Management and Budget. In 1991, Powell told the *Los Angeles Times* that the fellowship was "a defining experience," and the year in the White House taught him that, in Washington, "the whole thing is greased by compromise and consensus."

So the life experiences in the military and the government that created the good about Powell—his appreciation of equal access to good schools, of the importance of work, and of the ability to make government a force for good—have also produced the bad about him. Which is this: While Powell is regarded by those who have worked with him as a straight-shooting broker, his Washington years taught him not to ruffle feathers, even if the feathers in question desperately deserved to be ruffled.

"I've always thought of General Powell as sort of on the leading edge of the conventional wisdom," says David Evans, a former military reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* who is now director of national defense programs for Business Executives for National Security. For a man who was at the Pentagon with Weinberger, at the National Security Council with Reagan, and head of the JCS, the conventional wisdom was to preserve as much as possible of the federal pie for defense, even in a time of dwindling threats and rising deficits.

On becoming chairman, Powell set up a small working group in the Joint Chiefs' office, with lines to the comptroller's office and to Cheney's shop, to produce the first major military downsizing plan. "He thought he had to take the lead and get out in front of Congress and the administration," says Tom Christie, a former

member of Cheney's staff. "Powell wanted to do it on his terms." The result was perhaps Powell's finest bureaucratic hour when, in 1990, he convinced Bush and Cheney to maintain what Powell dubbed a "base force" of 1.6 million with overall defense spending set at about \$290 billion by 1993. In a pre-emptive interview with *The Washington Post* before the administration had officially announced its position, Powell said a "a fundamental break point" would occur "somewhere in the neighborhood of maybe a 20 to 25 percent reduction from where we are now" in both force size and military expenditures.

But when you look at the big picture, Powell helped preserve an essentially Cold War budget with no Cold War foe to fight. To be sure, there were cuts from previously planned levels and the real costs of the base force by 1995 would have been roughly 20 percent lower than they were in 1989, but the containment of the Soviet Union accounted for more than 50 percent of that 1989 defense budget. Evidence that more could have been done came when the Clinton administration both cut planned spending by \$60 billion more and the force to 1.45 million troops with—this is essential—*no obvious effect on readiness*, according to the Congressional Budget Office and a Pentagon commission on readiness comprised of flag officers and chaired by retired General Edward Meyer. The savings came from killing some weapons systems and much of the SDI program. To be sure, there have been reports this fall questioning the readiness of a few Army divisions, but these shortfalls are not the result of too little money being spent on defense but of too much money being spent on the wrong things. Instead of earmarking enough dollars, for example, to keep important troops well-armed, billions go to weapons systems such as the F-22 that are of dubious necessity and quality and to funding overlapping projects such as separate service air fleets—two areas, by the way, Powell did little to reform. Obviously, as a soldier, Powell's inclination was to protect the military's turf as far as he could, and this meant preserving the largest base force he could get away with to satisfy, on the one hand, calls in Congress for a peace dividend and, on the other, the chiefs' reluctance to cut *anything*.

Part of the reason for Powell's protectiveness of the basic military structure is cultural: A chairman meets twice a week in The Tank, a secure, top-secret Pentagon conference room, with the service chiefs; he knows them, came up through the ranks with them, wants to make them happy. Powell fell victim to this tendency even though he was the chief implementer of the landmark Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which bolstered the JCS chairman's power. Before the act, a chairman could not make official recommendations to the secretary of Defense or the president without unanimous support from all the chiefs—a situation that reduced most chairmen to irrelevance, since such consensus was virtually impossible to achieve. After the act, however, the chairman alone was made "principal military advisor" to the president, was given a deputy, and now controlled the Joint Staff.

In spite of Powell's newfound statutory power, his experience as chairman suggests that the basic urge for consensus remains ingrained in the military (and political) world. The chiefs are, after all, still the chairman's constituency, even though the chairman is officially a presidential appointee. It is much easier to take a few hits on the Hill than to irritate your people, the guys who, after all, are in *your* business. "Powell's formula was the same old force reduced by whatever it took to meet congressional demands that could not be resisted for a smaller budget," says Edward N. Luttwak, a defense expert and author of *The Logic of War and Peace*, "and this assurance of continuity cemented his ties to the service chiefs, who gave him their loyalty and respect in return."

By the early nineties, however, with the Soviet Union dead, the bills for the Reagan spendup coming due, and the deficit continuing to rise, even conservatives such as Sam Nunn were eager to make the Pentagon spend its money wisely. So on July 2, 1992, Nunn took to the Senate floor and attacked the military's expensive redundancies, arguing that billions could be saved and military capability preserved by commonsensically cutting huge areas of overlap.

Powell's answer to Nunn came in the form of a February 1993 report to Congress on the military's warfighting roles and missions (which branch gets which weapons, helicopters, missiles, etc.). Like all bureaucracies, public or pri-

vate, the military never exactly jumps at the chance to make major changes; the existing structure was originally hashed out at Key West between Secretary of Defense James Forrester and the service chiefs in 1948. Since then, the different services have been geniuses at securing and clinging to pieces of technological and budgetary action for themselves—the Navy and the Air Force both build and operate satellites, for instance, and both design, build, test, and field cruise missiles. The branches' love of their own fleets of aircraft prompted Barry Goldwater to say frequently we are the only military in the world with four air forces.

After Nunn's speech, Powell and his staff circulated three drafts of the chairman's recommendations; each got progressively less ambitious as it made its way around the Pentagon. Insiders say Powell wanted to be bolder but, with no political backup from the executive branch or the Hill, was afraid of infuriating the services. As Bush fought for re-election, he and Cheney were uninterested in sweeping change; neither Clinton nor Aspin seriously pursued restructuring after they came to power. "Inside the building, Powell was taking a lot of heat, and he saw himself fighting this battle all alone," says a former top Pentagon official. "So he decided the hell with it and sent up a modest report."

With the report, the general managed to disappoint everybody outside the services, from Nunn on the right to House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ron Dellums on the left. Reviewing Powell's product, the nonpartisan General Accounting Office found "it did not recommend significant reductions in overlapping functions," and the GAO cited 15 areas of possible major change that Powell did not address.

Take two cases. The first: Both the Army and the Marines have expeditionary troops to respond quickly to a crisis anywhere in the world. Each of the Marines' three 10,000-man divisions and four of the Army's 12 divisions (the 82nd Airborne, which is for paratrooping; the 101st air assault, which is for helicopter attacks; and two light infantry divisions, which put soldiers on the ground) are designed for rapid deployment. There is no historical evidence, however, that we need more light infantry capability than the three Marine divisions and elements of the 82nd and 101st can provide.

Between 1945 and 1978, for example, the Congressional Budget Office found that of the 215 incidents that resulted in some sort of U.S. military action, only 5 percent required a force of division size or more of these contingency forces. Since 1978, only one operation—the Gulf—required more than a full expeditionary division. This includes Grenada, Beirut, Panama, Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti. And even in the Gulf, the largest American clash of arms since Vietnam, neither of the two ground Army light infantry divisions—which since 1983 have, unlike their predecessors, included no tanks—were deployed because what was needed were heavily armored troops, not light infantry soldiers. (Heavy Army divisions, by the way, are what the military *has* agreed to cut, even though experience suggests precisely the opposite course would be best.)

Another division in the light infantry force structure Powell left untouched is the 82nd, designed to drop troops into hostile territory from the air by parachute. But the last time the U.S. conducted a full-scale parachute operation with an entire division was World War II. In three major operations since—Korea, Vietnam, and Panama—the 82nd dropped at most a third of a division; in the Gulf the 82nd was involved in no major battles.

The GAO estimates that if the U.S. had another Desert Storm deployment, we would still have enough light infantry troops in our current force structure to maintain a presence in all parts of the world and conduct *two*—not one, but two—operations equivalent in size to the 1989 invasion of Panama. So the wise thing to do would be to eliminate the two Army ground

light infantry divisions and combine the airborne and air assault divisions (with a third of the resulting force designated for parachute

drops). The CBO says the savings from this step would be about \$16 billion. If, to get the Army to go along, you wanted to preserve one of its ground light infantry divisions—which could be useful if the Marine divisions were all somehow tied up in one place, however unlikely that is—it would be essential to equip them with some kind of tank component for protection. During the Somalia operation, remember, ground commanders of light infantry troops thought they needed more tanks than they had prior to the 1993 firefight that killed 18 American

servicemen. Keeping one division would still save \$14.5 billion.

This is not liberal whining about spending money on defense. Nunn and private-sector groups such as Business Executives for National Security argue for such efficient, cost-saving steps in order to make sure existing troops are well-trained and well-equipped. If you fear—as anyone sane should—a “hollow force” of ill-trained and ill-equipped soldiers, you should be especially interested in making sure that money spent on defense is spent wisely; conversely, this means that money wasted on whole divisions we don’t need can’t be used to arm the divisions we do need.

But did Powell acknowledge that the Army’s light divisions are at worst redundant and at best ill-equipped? No. He said the Army and the Marines should maintain separate expeditionary forces (“The capabilities of the contingency and expeditionary forces in the Army and Marine

Powell was supposed to recommend sweeping changes in roles and missions. He circulated three drafts in the Pentagon; each got progressively less ambitious. “Inside the building,” says a former official, “Powell was taking a lot of heat, and he saw himself fighting the battle all alone. So he decided the hell with it and sent up a modest report.”

Corps provide decisionmakers with valuable alternatives and should be retained.”) Then Powell took the time-honored Washington step of suggesting that the issue be studied further. A commission on roles and missions was formed and is expected to report next summer, but the secretary of Defense is under no obligation to do anything the commission recommends.

Plane Truths

Powell did not limit his log-rolling to the Army and the Marines. He took care of the Navy and the Air Force, too. Right now, the U.S. can use either or both of these services for air strikes. The Air Force operates long-range and medium-range bombers from air bases; the Navy flies attack aircraft off carriers at sea. With the end of the Cold War, though, the need to hold in check the Air Force’s long-range bombers (B-1s, B-2s, and B-52s) for possible nuclear missions disappeared, leaving more of its aircraft available for conventional strikes. Meanwhile, the Navy is building toward a 12-carrier fleet (carriers are famously expensive and cumbersome to operate). In the old days, the admirals defended building carriers because, as World War II demonstrated, carriers are ideal for fighting other large navies. Then the Soviets collapsed, and there were no other navies. No problem, said the Navy; now we need carriers because they can defend U.S. interests in regional conflicts.

While it is true that there are some missions that carriers can more effectively execute, in many cases the U.S. already has bases around the world and Air Force aircraft to handle tasks the Navy likes to claim only carriers can complete. There is, for example, a U.S. base in Turkey from which we could launch aircraft to fight in the Persian Gulf. The other potential hotspot Pentagon planners worry about these days is Korea, and we could use our bases in Japan to fend off a North Korean invasion of the South. And of course any crisis in our hemisphere could be handled by the numerous U.S. bases here.

Even with carriers available, it often makes more sense to use the Air Force’s land-based fleet of roughly 200 long-range and 300 medium-range craft (the F-117, the F-111, and the F-15E). In the Gulf War, for instance, although

there were six carriers in the region, land-based Air Force and Marine planes flew 76 percent of the missions; the Navy flew just 24 percent. Moreover, the Navy planes had to use land bases to be able to carry their maximum bomb loads. In fact, the greatest naval success story of the Gulf War was not its carrier air attacks but its Tomahawk missile launches. Problem is, the Tomahawk example is not an argument for more *carriers*, because the missiles can be fired from smaller vessels, including Aegis cruisers, Arleigh Burke destroyers, and attack submarines.

Moreover, in the future, sea-based aircraft may be even less effective than they already are. The Navy is retiring its A-6 and has firm plans for only an interim replacement—the E/F model of the F/A-18. And because the F/A-18 has a shorter range and smaller payload than the A-6, the floating cities we are paying for now may not have effective planes to carry. And a final point: Carriers bring legions of ships with them, severely limiting a carrier group’s *offensive* capability, because you also have to defend the cruisers, destroyers, and supply ships that come along. Roughly, \$10 billion spent on a carrier group can buy you 30 offensive aircraft; \$10 billion spent by the Air Force can buy you about 300. Nevertheless, in 1993, under Powell’s chairmanship, the Navy asked for a \$800 million down payment on a new \$4.8 billion carrier. Nunn—hardly a flowers-in-his-hair peacenik—asked Powell to consider the proper balance between the two kinds of air power. The JCS chairman responded that there was no need for change. He thereby preserved the Navy’s favorite boondoggle.

Eliminating five carriers would net \$17 billion and this year would have enabled the country to have met each military crisis that arose in which carriers were deployed, including the flare-ups in the Persian Gulf and in Haiti. Just cutting back two carriers would have saved \$7 billion. But Powell ducked the issue altogether, content to let the Navy keep its toys. “Roles and missions ends up in every chairman’s ‘too-hard-to-handle’ box,” says General David Jones, a former JCS chairman. “It’s just very difficult.”

One of the most enduring images of Powell is as the victorious master of the Gulf War; any future political campaign will inevitably include stirring pictures of the troops in the desert. What the ads won’t mention is that one of the central

goals of the war—destroying Saddam’s army, especially his elite Republican Guard—did not happen. “First we are going to cut it off,” Powell declared of the Iraqi army as the war began, “then we are going to kill it.”

Instead, most of the Guard escaped from Kuwait with much of their equipment, assets that enable Saddam to remain in power. General Norman Schwarzkopf had planned a two-pronged attack. As James G. Burton, a retired Air Force colonel and author of the book *The Pentagon Wars*, points out, there were two escape routes for the Iraqis out of the Kuwaiti theater, one westward through the Euphrates River corridor and one north out of Basra. To cut off both routes, Schwarzkopf planned to “close the back door” to Iraq by having the Army’s XVIII Corps and VII Corps form a hook that blocked both. On the ground, however, the VII Corps moved too slowly across the desert, leaving the northern hatch open. Meanwhile, the Iraqis, sensing major defeat, began fleeing to the north.

About this time back in Washington, television reporters were beaming back images of the so-called “Highway of Death,” a ragtag collection of fleeing Iraqis—not the Republican Guard. The White House, sensitive to the appearance that we were bombing a retreating force, pressured Powell to wrap things up quickly, according to Schwarzkopf’s memoirs and the forthcoming *The Generals’ War* by Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor. “In recommending an end to the war,” Gordon and Trainor write, “Powell was motivated by considerations that went beyond military concerns. Determined that the military would erase the stain of Vietnam and come out of the Gulf War victorious with its honor intact, the JCS chairman wanted to avoid the impression that the United States was piling on and killing Iraqis for the sake of killing them. If that meant erring on the side of caution, Powell was prepared to live with that.”

At the time, Schwarzkopf thought the Guard was trapped. So he held his famous February 27 press conference, declaring, “The gates are closed. There is no way out.” A few hours after Schwarzkopf’s press conference, Powell called him to ask if he would agree to an end to offensive operations the next morning. Schwarzkopf initially told Powell he wanted another day to mop up. When Powell called back and pushed

again, Schwarzkopf said OK, agreeing to a cease fire roughly 100 hours after the ground war had begun. A few hours after *that*, Schwarzkopf found out that the back door was not in fact closed; he had received bad information from the field, but the cease-fire had already been announced.

As it developed, no field commanders thought the Guard had yet been destroyed or that closing the circle would have cost many U.S. lives. But the Washington political pressure, combined with confusion, had ended the war. Powell’s instincts in this case—wrap it up and save lives—were of course the right ones, even though the inadvertent result was leaving a strong Saddam in power. What’s interesting, however, about the general’s performance is that his role was as much political as it was military; he was, in this case, a general in the tradition of an Alexander Haig, a man of policy and Washington rather than of the battlefield. Of dealing with Powell during the war, Schwarzkopf later told Gordon and Trainor he was never sure when Powell was offering a Powell view or was representing the views of

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others—a classic political tactic: “I never had the ability to sort out what was Powell, what was Scowcroft, what was Cheney, what was the president.”

Job performance aside, for politics today the question is: Will Powell run? Already, a “Draft Powell” committee has been formed by Chuck Kelly, a Washington hand who also worked for the last general to become president: Eisenhower. This is a useful parallel, for in his military career Ike was also derisively described as a “political general” who never forced major change. Yet, in the White House, Eisenhower effectively kept defense spending under control in part because his impeccable military credentials prevented the Pentagon from attacking him. Like Eisenhower and like Franklin Roosevelt, who served eight years as assistant secretary of the Navy, Powell knows government intimately, which means he knows the tricks bureaucrats and agencies play to keep themselves afloat even after their usefulness has disappeared. There is much potential, then, for Powell to emulate some of our greatest presidents.

Yet, it seems probable that Powell, a proud man who has a military man’s love of precision, won’t put up with what it takes to run. NBC’s Fred Francis, who considers Powell a professional friend and says that in 13 years of official and semi-official contact Powell never misled him, sometimes saw the results of the general’s obsession with accuracy. “When I did something that he thought was wrong, I’d go on the air at 7 o’clock, and the phone would ring right after that,” Francis recalls. “It would be Powell on the line saying ‘Francis, you’re full of shit.’” A presidential campaign, with its Alice-in-Wonderland quality and slap-dash reporting, is not designed for a man of Powell’s temperament. He may decide, with his lucrative lecture fees and his already-mythic reputation, to lead a comfortable, quiet life as an undisputed hero.

If the general were to run and turn out to be a dragon-slayer, one with a vision of unity at home and the courage to take on competing special interests, then he could be a great president. But judging from the record, this would require a different Colin Powell—not the one the nation currently idolizes. □