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On Shaky Grounds: Reasons behind the failure to adhere to the "Powell Doctrine" in the 2003 Iraq invasion

Sasha Anderson

Why did we go to war with Iraq and what are we still doing there? This question is one of our most pressing foreign policy issues and continues to be hotly debated by politicians, journalists and citizens. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was executed in a strikingly different fashion than the strategy used in an earlier conflict with Iraq, the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991. Rather than follow a strategy consisting of clear goals, overwhelming force and a predetermined exit strategy, the US military blundered into Iraq in 2003 without a way to measure victory and without a plan for how to extract themselves from the conflict. This murky strategy in no way resembles the policy that became known as the "Powell Doctrine" that was so well implemented in Iraq in the 1990s. Though the two conflicts involve the same opposition and similar motivations, the Powell Doctrine was not followed in 2003, potentially due to lack of US and international support, a changing media environment, the ambiguity of the phrase "war on terror," and the political ambitions of George W. Bush.

The Persian Gulf War was a model implementation of the "Powell Doctrine." This doctrine, coined for Powell's impressive use of it, outlines a formula for the proper assessment of threat, advocates the use of overwhelming force when invasion is approved, and provides for a clear exit strategy tied to a specific definition of victory agreed upon before aggression is initiated. The roots of this policy lie in Powell's experience in the Vietnam War, where he was able to observe first-hand the mistakes of the US government during his two tours in the country (Powell 148).

The repercussions of invasion without a clear plan and without the necessary numbers to take control of a region became clear to Powell in Vietnam. He later described conflict in Vietnam as a "halfhearted half-war, with much of the nation opposed or indifferent, while a small fraction carried the burden" (Powell 148). In response to this observation, Powell went on the argue that "war should be the politics of last resort, and when we go to war, we should have a purpose that our people understand and support; we should mobilize the country's resources to fulfill that mission and then go in to win" (148). Instead, Vietnam lost thousands of American lives, failed to achieve clear success, and left United States citizens disillusioned with the military (Campbell 1998). Shortly after this conflict, confidence sank so low that there was talk of dismantling much of the military. The scramble to keep a strong military force intact led to a policy of reluctance that was championed by Powell and ostensibly remains today (Campbell 1998).

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From this on-the-ground experience, Powell went on to serve under Caspar Weinberger, who was the original advocate of clear planning and overwhelming force. Weinberger was able to pass on to Powell six major tenants that would serve as the foundation for Powell's foreign policy strategy. Powell himself clearly states the roots of his beliefs in his biography *My American Journey*, in a passage outlining an address at the National Press Club. Powell describes these tests to be:

1) Commit only if our or our allies' vital interests are at stake. 2) If we commit, do so with all the resources necessary to win. 3) Go in only with clear political and military objectives. 4) Be ready to change the commitment if the objectives change, since wars rarely stand still. 5) Only take on commitments that can gain the support of the American people and the Congress. 6) Commit US forces only as a last resort (303).

This strategy for the use of military force was followed effectively by the first Bush administration during the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, where Powell served as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Though debate remains about whether the US should have stayed longer in the Gulf, it is generally looked upon as a success. The US had the support of the international community and was able to quickly exit once the terms for victory were met (Sifry 492). Rather than linger to fight new, small battles, troops were recalled after the 100th hour and Iraq began its retreat out of Kuwait.

The first condition that needs to be established, according to the Powell Doctrine, is whether a given situation constitutes a threat to national security. As they were positioned on the border of Kuwait, Iraqi forces would have been able to push the conflict into Saudi Arabia, destabilizing the entire region (Sifry 19). This was a threat to a Saudi Arabia and had the potential to destabilize the region, and thus member states of the United Nations were in support of an attack to push back the Iraqi forces as there was no way to tell if Saddam had intentions to drive his force into Saudi Arabia. The United States was also personally concerned with strategic oil interests and international concern for the independence of Kuwait, which led to the decision that the situation was indeed a threat to security (Sifry 22). Leading up to the release of US troops, the United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 660 condemning the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and called for immediate Iraqi withdrawal.

After identifying the invasion of Kuwait to be a significant threat to the U.S., Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Dick Cheney came before the Senate Armed Forces Committee to show them the merit of an invasion and to ask for their support in the effort (Powell 493). The backing of the United Nations was also gained in the Security Council meeting that voted to approve the use of "all necessary means" (UN Resolution 687). This decision passed with a vote of 12-2 in favor of the use of force to expel Iraq from Kuwait. Many other countries committed soldiers to the attack.

Once the need to intervene was established and the general American public and world at large were in favor of intervention, large quantities of troops were assembled in order to quickly force back the Iraqi troops with as few Western casualties as possible. In the region there eventually built up "539,000 American troops in the Gulf along

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with 270,000 Allied troops from more than two dozen nations, the largest deployment of land troops and air power since World War II" (The History Place). This is an overwhelming amount of force given that Kuwait is only about 2/3 the size of the state of Vermont. The military also planned an attack using all forms of offense, not just responding with less troop-intensive air strikes. Though many in power, including the president, repeatedly asked if air strikes would suffice, Powell and others were adamant that more force would be needed. As Powell put it "we were planning a full campaign - air, land, sea, and space - to remove the decision from Saddam's hands" (Powell 476).

After amassing an overwhelming force, President Bush and his military advisors continued with Powell Doctrine strategizing by deciding that Iraq's retreat from Kuwait would be the measure of victory in Operation Desert Storm (Powell 520). Powell recommended that troops be removed once it was clear that the Iraqi forces had been sufficiently controlled and were on their way out. In hindsight, Powell reflected that "we were fighting a limited war under a limited mandate for a limited purpose, which was soon going to be achieved. I thought that the people responsible ought to start thinking about how to end it" (Powell 519). This was done in response to Powell's fear that the military and US government would continue to find small battles that would keep US forces in the region indefinitely. Instead, the conflict was called to an end on the one-hundredth hour of war. President Bush clearly stated that the mission had been achieved by saying, "Kuwait is liberated. Iraq's army is defeated, our military objectives are met" (qtd. in Powell 523).

There it was, the neat, clean, 100-hour war in which the United States was able to meet a clear military objective with the support of the international community and then to withdraw from conflict. So how has the United States come from this successful beginning to an ongoing war that, with President Obama's recent withdrawal announcement, may last seven years (Baker)? The uses of military force against Iraq in 1990 and 2003 share very similar motivations, both strategic and ideological. It seems strange that a conflict with the same country and with some overlapping motivations was handled so differently. These similarities included the strategic need for oil, the threat of Saddam Hussein, a fear of weapons of mass destruction, and an ideological focus on the intolerability of Iraq's actions in the region.

Both invasions were clearly a struggle over oil resources, with Iraq claiming historical ties in order to conquer strategic regions of Kuwait (Sifry 17). As for America, we are the top consumer in the oil industry, and logically have a stake in making sure that these resources remain available to us at a balanced, market-driven price (EIA). Daniel Yergin, the head of a leading energy research firm, proposes three reasons why the oil argument cannot be discarded (Sifry 23). The first is that the use of oil has been directly tied to the emergence of modern capitalism and business. Oil has remained among the greatest industries for decades and its changes are not just reported in the business section, but rather it is the talk of front page news stories. This shows the extent to which the global economy is tied to oil and how fluctuations in that market have far-reaching effects that echo into all aspects of our lives. Because of this centrality, Yergin proposes the second reason for oil as a motivation to be its role in geopolitics and global power. The use of oil in combat machinery makes it an indispensible resource for any nation

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aspiring to achieve regional or global dominance. The fact that the United States has to import a large share of its oil means that we are inevitably tied to the conflicts that arise over oil, and hence our involvement in Kuwait in 1990 and Iraq in 2003. The final reason it is so clear that oil does indeed need to be viewed as a motivation for both conflicts is the fact that modern American life is structured around oil. It allows us to build decentralized suburbs and to drive rather than build public transportation. This has led some to call us a "Hydrocarbon Society," in which oil makes possible the way we live, work, travel and even to how we date (Sifry 25). Oil has become such an integral part of American society that Yergin makes the claim that we are a "civilization that would collapse if the world's oil wells suddenly went dry." Clearly then, our society has a need for oil and is inevitably going to be concerned whenever there is conflict surrounding this resource.

Another similarity between the two conflicts is that both George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush harbored a hatred of Saddam and hoped to see him removed from power. Some of this antagonism may be valid, given the grave human rights abuses conducted in Iraq. But there are many other authoritarian regimes that exist in the region, yet Saddam was a particular enemy of both presidents. In his speech announcing the start of the Persian Gulf War, Bush sensationally spoke of Saddam's actions, saying, "Saddam Hussein systematically raped, pillaged, and plundered a tiny nation, no threat to his own. He subjected the people of Kuwait to unspeakable atrocities -- and among those maimed and murdered, innocent children" (Bush 1991). George W. Bush also spoke of Saddam in sensationalized terms, implicating his regime in an "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address. He then went on to imply he had a personal grudge against Saddam due to the conflict during his father's presidency (Fisher).

From this personal animosity, both built ideological platforms on which to base their wars. In 1990, Bush famously stated "we will not let this aggression stand" and went on to lay the groundwork for continuing US concern with Iraq by saying, "there will be a lasting role for the United States in assisting the nations of the Persian Gulf, our role then is to deter future aggression" (qtd. in Tuathail 133). This speech became the slogan "this will not stand" symbolizing a moral stance against the actions of Iraq. His son created a similar slogan, the "war on terror" which was used to evoke the same feeling of emotional patriotism. Both campaigns were constructed to win the support of the American people and elicit an emotional response to the issue. On March 18, 2003, in his ultimatum speech to Saddam, Bush stated that "the regime has a history of reckless aggression in the Middle East. It has a deep hatred of America and our friends. And it has aided, trained and harbored terrorists, including operatives of al Qaeda," thus linking Iraq to the terrorist events of September 11, 2001 (Bush 2003).

Finally, in both wars the threat of weapons of mass destruction was used as a motive to enter into conflict with Iraq. In 1990, Bush was concerned with Saddam's stockpile of chemical weapons and sought to "curb the proliferation of chemical, biological, ballistic missile and, above all, nuclear technologies" (The History Place). A UN weapons inspection team had been involved in the area for years and it was known that Saddam has chemical and biological weapons, and it was anticipated that he would try and seek nuclear technology (Ritter 105). In addition, the UN had passed resolution 687, demanding that Saddam actually destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction so

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that the economic sanctions may be lifted (Ritter 104). In the beginning of the next decade, the large concern from the presidency was the supposed presence of nuclear weapons. Colin Powell testified in front of the UN on February 5, 2003 saying that Saddam did indeed have nuclear technology, but the evidence for this conclusion was later found to be falsified (Leung). This motivation was highly vocalized in the months leading up to the war, but lost steam as reports came in discounting the credibility of intelligence information, and has not been used as a justification in the more recent years of the ongoing war (Leung).

Given the similarities of the conflicts and rhetoric surrounding them, why was the strategy of the Persian Gulf War not used in the war in Iraq? Why was the 2003 conflict not ended after the fall of Saddam? Colin Powell himself had been pulled back into the government to serve as Secretary of State under the second George Bush. Yet, he was unable to apply the same principles to the second conflict in Iraq. The first tenet of the Powell Doctrine, a clear threat to national security, was based on shaky facts and the implementation went downhill from there.

At the outset, the goal was to establish a clear need to invade by convincing the American public, as well as the international community, that Iraq was indeed building nuclear weapons and that this technology was a threat to our security. Following the Iraqi defeat in the Persian Gulf War, the United Nations passed resolution 687 to require Iraq to disclose its weapons stockpile and how they were produced (Ritter 31). In fact, the UN economic sanctions in response to the invasion of Kuwait were extended until Saddam handed over the weapons (a first sign of the lingering effect of invading bodies that Powell and others feared). In response, Saddam sought to conceal a good portion of his chemical, biological and potential nuclear weapons supply and to claim that he was developing a program for nuclear enrichment, not for building nuclear weapons, and that materials for this purpose had been destroyed (Ritter 34). The economic sanctions continued and Iraq was driven to poverty and hunger, so much so that they signed onto the "oil for food" (UN Resolution 986) agreement in which Iraq sold two billion dollars in oil every six months to pay for food and medicine (Ritter 149). Multiple conflicts between the UN inspections team and Iraq took place and the United States eventually settled into a containment strategy under the Clinton administration. But, the question of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was to be reawakened in light of September 11, 2001.

In order to make the case for Iraq's possession of nuclear weapons, then Secretary of State Colin Powell came before the UN Security Council representing the United States' position. He began by making the case that Iraq had been evading weapons inspections for the last twelve years and that action needed to be taken by the UN Security Council in order to establish their authority (Powell 2003). He then went on to make the infamous claim that tubes found in Iraq were for enriching Uranium and had been obtained from Africa. But Powell himself admitted that it was not certain that the tubes were not merely being used for conventional weaponry. He stated, "these tubes are controlled by the Nuclear Suppliers Group precisely because they can be used as centrifuges for enriching uranium. By now, just about everyone has heard of these tubes, and we all know that there are differences of opinion. There is controversy about what these tubes are for" (CNN). Powell also testified before the Senate Foreign Relations

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Committee in September 2002 that Saddam had attempted to obtain uranium from Niger. President Bush then went on to make that same claim in an infamous sixteen word sentence in his 2003 State of the Union Address.

It is now generally accepted that this intelligence was falsified by various intelligence bodies within the administration to provide an excuse for entering Iraq (Leung). In fact, a new intelligence bureaucracy, the Office of Special Plans, was created specifically to generate information in support of the invasion of Iraq. One of this office's main goals was to establish the link between al-Qaeda and Iraq by pulling information from "raw" officer reports (Borger). Many of the officials working for the office were untrained in intelligence and pressed for time, so the information passed on to those in charge was based on guesses at best and outright fabrications at the worst. Often the information was "passed on to the national security council and the president without having been vetted with anyone other than political appointees" (Borger). In addition, the then CIA Director, George Tenet, stated after the invasion that "his agency was under pressure to justify a war that the administration had already decided on" (Borger). We now know that much of the intelligence used was falsified in order to create the claims the president was looking for. It is interesting to explore to what extent Secretary Powell was aware of the false nature of the information, as his testimonies, along with those of other high-ranking officials, laid the groundwork for a convincing war with Iraq. The use of this false information could have been due to the fact that Bush had been attempting to construct a solid reason for removing Saddam from power prior to the 9/11 attacks (Barstow).

Potentially, Bush felt that Iraq had not been properly dealt with in the Persian Gulf War. Though the implementation of the Powell Doctrine in this operation was near to perfect, many criticized George H.W. Bush for pulling out too soon and not further weakening Iraq so that Saddam would not continue to be a threat in the future. This explanation for divergence from previous strategy stems from two motives, the personal and the political. Those less personally critical of George W. Bush have claimed that from a defensive military standpoint, it would have been smarter to have defeated Saddam the first time around when we were already involved in the area. This criticism may have spurred Bush to fight Iraq for the second time to in a sense deal with unfinished business. The other, more personal critics, claim that Bush was fulfilling a personal vendetta against Saddam leftover from his father's presidency (DeFrank). Evidence used for this argument is found in a speech given at a fund-raising dinner in Houston Texas wherein Bush stated "after all, this is a guy that tried to kill my dad at one time." This offhanded statement "made some wonder whether the impulse for war reflected careful considerations of national security or was instead a family grudge match" observed Louis Fisher in a 2003 issuing of Political Science Quarterly.

From this shaky beginning, the United States government continued to ignore the outlines of the Powell doctrine. The use of the phrase "war on terror" made victory an ambiguous notion. What exactly does the defeat of terror look like? When can we state that the US has sufficiently dealt with terror? This led to an underwhelming use of force. Rather than flood the area, topple Saddam, and withdraw, the plan committed a very low number of troops in comparison to the Gulf War. On December 21, 2002, an estimated 200,000 troops were approved to be deployed to the Gulf region, with British and Australian troops to follow (Brunner). War was then declared on

March 19 alongside the campaign Operation Iraqi Freedom. This operation involved an airstrike to overthrow Saddam. It is interesting to note here that George Bush Senior asked several times in the planning stages of the Persian Gulf War if an airstrike would be sufficient, and Colin Powell, along with others, explained that just using air forces would not be enough strength to quickly and thoroughly eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Yet, in contrast to accepted military wisdom, the first offense in the 2003 Iraq war was solely an air affront. This move was to be indicative of the entire war, in which not enough force has been used to take complete control of the situation. After a second round of air strikes on Bagdad, grounds troops finally came in the southern border of Iraq from Kuwait. At that point, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said on March 20 that "what will follow will not be a repeat of any other conflict. It will be of a force and a scope and a scale that has been beyond what we have seen before" (Brunner). Yet, the use of force was not overwhelming. It is true that the offense against Iraq was unlike any other conflict, but not in that it used an incredible amount of force.

Three days after declaring war, the Bush administration was warned by several former generals that there needed to be more troops in Iraq if we wanted to successfully seize and hold the area, but their comments fell on deaf ears (Tristam). Rumsfeld had to field feedback that said the US had still not deployed enough ground troops by March 30, 2003. And, after the fall of Bagdad on April 9, the US continued to fight the insurgency rather than withdraw. On May 1st, Bush declared "major combat operations in Iraq have ended" thus officially ending the war (Tristam). Yet, the fighting carried on and American lives continued to be lost. Situations kept arising that "required" us to stay and deal with Iraq's problems, the largest of which being the al-Qaeda resurgence in response to the US invasion. During the Persian Gulf War, opportunities also arose after the first 100 hours for further intervention into Iraq, but we chose to leave because of a clear goal. In 2003, the "war on terror" was so adaptable to any action that the resurgence was fought rather than troops withdrawn. Al-Qaeda established a group in the region and began to impose "Taliban-like repression on Iraqis" in the places where they had overtaken (Tristam). Operation Desert Scorpion was launched on June 15, 2003 and marked the continuation of fighting that persists to this day.

This lingering is a divergence from the last part of the Powell Doctrine: a clear exit strategy. Because we lack solid criteria for victory, there is no way to decide on an exit strategy, except to set arbitrary withdraw dates that correspond to no specific accomplishment in the region. The United States continues to play around with withdraw dates while adding to the laundry list of tasks to accomplish in Iraq, something that Colin Powell had always feared. Powell was heavily influenced by Fred Ikle's book *Every War Must End* wherein he writes that "fighting often continues long past the point where a 'rational' calculation would indicate that the war should be ended" (qtd in Powell 519).

It is hard to understand why the 2003 invasion of Iraq was not conducted according to the clear and previously successful guidelines of the Powell Doctrine. One possible explanation is the fact that we now receive news media in almost real-time, which makes it harder to keep military plans opaque to the American people and to the rest of the world. This was already beginning to be a problem in Kuwait, and Powell himself admits "in this new media

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environment we had to learn how to make the people understand and support what we were doing" (Powell 530). This problem is exacerbated by the current rapid expansion of technology, where most households have more televisions than people and the use of the internet is widespread. Information no longer takes days or even weeks to be circulated. Instead, the American public, and those around the world, are able to almost instantaneously to see and hear what is going on in conflict zones and with those in power. This leads to a hard-sell as far as conflict goes, particularly with the war in Iraq and the ever-shifting reasons given for going to war. American skepticism made it hard for President Bush to commit an overwhelming amount of troops, since the war was not largely supported and because he could not hide behind lagging media response. The confidence of the American people was rattled with the discovery of faulty intelligence information regarding weapons of mass destruction and media coverage of the lies certainly hurt the case for intervening in Iraq (Fisher). The international community was also able to watch the actions of the US government leading up to the invasion of Iraq, and subsequent military actions, and was as skeptical as the American public. The disapproval of the international community added to the opinions the Bush administration had to combat in order to deploy forces to Iraq, thus leading to an inability on the part of George Bush to muster an overwhelming military force.

Potentially, Bush's personality itself played a role in the continuing intervention in Iraq. Operation Desert Storm is generally regarded as a success, and George W. Bush may have wanted to leave the presidency with an equally successful military operation to his name. There certainly has been talk of Bush carrying on the family legacy, though to what extent Bush's stubborn nature and ego played a role in the military strategy is hard to accurately estimate. Many Americans felt "his rationale for war was confused by poorly reasoned statements and claims of Iraqi programs that rested on nonexistent facts" which he used to continue the conflict rather than set criteria for victory and withdrawal (Fisher 391).

Furthermore, the phrase "war on terror" is so ambiguous as to cover a range of military actions. There is no way to concretely measure the defeat of terror, and thus it is easy to continue fighting small battles in Iraq under the guise of fighting "terror." This has lead to the lingering effect of military intervention, wherein it is easy to continually find one more thing to do before withdrawal, rather than set a concrete deadline on conflict. Analyst David Fisher feels "Bush never tired of repeating that a link existed between Iraq and al-Qaeda" (Fisher 390). George Bush and his advisors could have set the toppling of Bagdad and the removal of Saddam from power as the deadline, and would have been able to end the attack on Iraq after a couple of weeks. Instead, we decided to address the resurgence of terrorist operations in the region, set-up an interim government and attempt to construct a new political society in the country. These tasks are very large and relatively hard to evaluate, and so the United States has become enmeshed in a murky campaign to fix Iraq that continues to this day.

Finally, what is known is that Colin Powell left the position as Secretary of State after George W. Bush's first term in office, potentially in response to the administration's failure to adhere to Powell's personal military strategy. Many speculate that the decision was both a voluntary and involuntary decision. A Washington Post interview mused that "as secretary, he [Powell] was repeatedly outmaneuvered by the Pentagon and was never able to persuade

the administration to adopt that approach in Iraq, or to accept the State Department's plans for post-invasion occupation in Iraq." The article then went on to cite a government official who felt, ""the decision was made to keep Rumsfeld and drop Powell because if they would have kept Powell and let [the Rumsfeld team] go, that would have been tantamount to an acknowledgment of failure in Iraq and our policies there." Powell himself was privy to the decision making that lead to the strategy that was implemented in 2003 in stark contrast to Powell's traditional strategy. He may be able to further shed light on the reasons for this divergence, as his resignation shows his frustration with the Bush administration's unwillingness to use the Powell Doctrine the second time around, regardless of its previous efficacy. The strategy of the 2003 war in Iraq leaves us to question to what extent Colin Powell was coerced into representing a strategy that was against his better judgment due to the pro-war sentiments of the administration.

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