

After Powell's speech

Media pundits in lockstep behind US war drive

Patrick Martin
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The speech by US Secretary of State Colin Powell to the UN Security Council Wednesday had little impact on international public opinion and the worldwide opposition to an American war against Iraq. Outside of the United States, media commentators and government officials—except those, like Tony Blair, already committed to war—dismissed the speech as a series of unsupported, and largely rehashed, allegations based on unverified sources.

A columnist in a leading German newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, said that one could not convict even a chicken thief on the basis of the “proofs” advanced by Powell. The Secretary of State’s arguments met none of the basic rules of evidence or standards of jurisprudence normally required to convict and punish an individual defendant, let alone to bomb and kill tens of thousands and lay waste to a nation of 23 million people.

The American media, on the other hand, embraced Powell’s speech as the definitive proof that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction and intends to share them with terrorists. Editorialists and columnists both liberal and conservative hailed the secretary of state’s performance and declared that nothing should now be allowed to stand in the way of a US onslaught against Baghdad.

The real purpose of this barrage of pro-war declarations is to intimidate and isolate domestic opponents of US aggression against Iraq. The US political establishment, through its media mouthpieces, is announcing that further public dissent against the Iraq war will be regarded as illegitimate, if not downright treasonous.

Liberal converts to war

Particularly significant is the shift among those columnists who have in the past expressed strong reservations or even outright opposition to another US war in the Persian Gulf. Two such commentators, Richard Cohen and Mary McGrory, write for the *Washington Post*, the leading newspaper in the US capital. Both published columns the day after Powell’s speech declaring they were now convinced of the case for military action.

Only two weeks before, McGrory penned a column full of sympathy for the antiwar protesters who participated in the

January 18 march and rally in Washington. Thursday’s column was headlined—in what could perhaps serve as the octogenarian liberal’s political epitaph—“I’m persuaded.”

McGrory writes, “I have resisted the push to war against Iraq because I thought George W. Bush was trying to pick a fight for all the wrong reasons—big oil, the far right—against the wrong enemy. The people who were pushing hardest are not people whose banner I could follow.... Among people I know, nobody was for the war.”

But Powell’s speech struck her like Saul on the road to Damascus: “His voice was strong and unwavering. He made his case without histrionics of any kind, with no verbal embellishments.... The cumulative effect was stunning. I was reminded of the day long ago when John Dean, a White House toady, unloaded on Richard Nixon and you could see the dismay written on Republican faces that knew impeachment was inevitable.”

She concludes, “I’m not ready for war yet. But Colin Powell has convinced me that it might be the only way to stop a fiend, and that if we do go, there is reason.”

Cohen’s past reservations about the Iraq war were more limited, and his conversion accompanied by a great deal of gushing over Powell’s presentation: “bone-chilling detail,” “so strong, so convincing,” “there is no choice.”

Expressing the illusions in Powell, the man of peace—so common among liberal wishful thinkers—Cohen writes: “It was the totality of the material and the fact that Powell himself had presented it. In this case, the messenger may have been more important than the message. This time, the finger-pointer was the man who, heretofore, had been accused of what in the Bush administration is a virtual slander: prudence. Here was a reasonable man making a reasonable case.”

It is worth taking note of the speed with which the two columns were produced. To meet their deadlines at the daily newspaper, they were probably typing away before Powell even finished speaking. It is virtually excluded that either of them took the time to review a transcript of his remarks, much less ponder the evidence.

For months McGrory has consistently criticized the war drive, while Cohen expressed various reservations, and open contempt for Bush himself. Yet within a few hours of Powell’s speech, each

had written an epistle announcing their conversion to the cause of war. Such is the shallowness of contemporary liberalism, and the gullibility and prostration of its representatives in the face of a government determined to go to war.

McGrory made reference in her column to the Vietnam War period. She well knows that the US government deliberately falsified the pretext for military intervention in Vietnam, the Tonkin Gulf incident. She does not draw the conclusion, however, that in the light of this history it is necessary to subject US government claims about war to an especially rigorous test. On the contrary, she swallows today's Tonkin Gulf incident, the alleged Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction, hook, line and sinker.

Perhaps McGrory and Cohen have converted to the judicial standard espoused by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The *Washington Post* reported January 30, in a story on a Pentagon press conference, that "Rumsfeld contended that the greater the threat, the less the evidence required before attacking." In other words, the more serious and sweeping the allegations against Iraq, the lower should be the amount of proof required!

The isolation of the warmongers

These media liberals are capitulating to the Bush war drive not because opposition to the war is unpopular, but, on the contrary, because on the eve of military action the American ruling elite feels increasingly isolated and seeks to suppress any public expression of dissent.

The most conscious sections of the ruling elite are well aware of the mass popular opposition to war with Iraq. This understanding was reflected in a commentary published February 5, written by the chief foreign affairs columnist for the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman. The Bush administration's plans for war against Iraq, he warned, are running far ahead of any popular support for them in US public opinion.

The column begins: "Talking with Bush administration officials of late I am struck by an incredible contrast. It is the contrast between the breathtaking audacity of what they intend to do in Iraq—an audacity that, I must say, has an appeal for me—and the incredibly narrow base of support that exists in America today for this audacious project."

Friedman writes that the real source of concern for those who, like himself, support US military action against Iraq, is not the attitude of the Arab states, Turkey or France, or a possible reaction among the Arab masses, but the attitude of the American people. "I'm worried about my neighbors," he says. "I've had a chance to travel all across the country since September, and I can say without hesitation there was not a single audience I spoke to where I felt there was a majority in favor of war in Iraq."

This admission has enormous political significance, given that Friedman writes as one of the most consistent supporters of American aggression in the Middle East. (For a critique of Friedman's recent pro-war writings, see these articles on the

World Socialist Web Site: "Inventing a pretext for war against Iraq, Friedman of the *Times* executes an assignment for the Pentagon" and "New York Times' Thomas Friedman: No problem with a war for oil")

Friedman claims that the "audacity" of the Bush administration consists in an attempt to turn Iraq into a workable democracy and thus transform the entire Middle East. This is not only preposterous, but deeply cynical. The real audacity which he admires is the Bush administration's drive to seize Iraq's oil resources and subject the entire region to US domination. Friedman is, in general, a worshipper of the use of force—even in this column he can't help but gloat over the fact that, in the event of a successful invasion, "Iraq will be controlled by the iron fist of the U.S. Army and its allies."

Whatever the immediate outcome of a US war with Iraq, the attempt to impose such an "iron fist" on the peoples of the Middle East will inevitably produce growing resistance, not only in that region, but internationally and above all within the United States.

The struggle against war

The embrace of warmongering, across the entire official spectrum of liberal and conservative opinion, means that an antiwar movement in the United States can only emerge in opposition to the entire political establishment.

A mass social movement today will not be simply a repetition of the Vietnam era. Unlike the 1960s, there is no section of the political establishment identified in any way with policies of democratic reform or social progress, or with real connections to the masses of working people. The entire political superstructure caters to the interests of a narrow financial elite which monopolizes wealth and dominates society to an extent not seen since the days of the robber barons.

There are, of course, differences within the political establishment and its media hangers-on. But the chasm of which Friedman speaks, between the mass opinion and elite opinion, arises from the fundamental socioeconomic schism in American society. The Bush administration and the ruling elite, as Friedman's warnings demonstrate, are well aware of their isolation and unpopularity. Behind the scenes, utilizing the threat of terrorist attack as a pretext, they are preparing to use the most ruthless and violent measures against a movement from below.



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