Colin Powell: The US ruling class mourns a faithful servant

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No one individual is so closely identified with so many of the crimes committed by American imperialism over more than four decades as Colin Powell. No one held so many high-ranking positions in the national security apparatus: general, national security advisor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, secretary of state.

That explains why, when he died early Monday morning at the age of 84 of complications of COVID-19, the American media, and much of the world media, was swamped with laudatory coverage and effusive tributes from presidents, congressional leaders and media pundits.

President Joe Biden ordered American flags to fly at half-staff for the rest of the week, while issuing a statement hailing Powell as "a patriot of unmatched honor and dignity" who "rose to the highest ranks of the United States military and to advise four Presidents." He cited Powell's "personal commitment to the democratic values that make our country strong," while he "repeatedly broke racial barriers."

Much of the Democratic Party adulation focused on Powell's role as the first African American to rise to the commanding heights of the US military machine. Congressman Jamaal Bowman, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, tweeted that "as a Black man just trying to figure out the world, Colin Powell was an inspiration" to him.

He did not elaborate on which Colin Powell was his inspiration: General Colin Powell helping rescue Ronald Reagan in the Iran-Contra scandal, or Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell overseeing the incineration of Iraqi conscripts in 1991, or Secretary of State Colin Powell justifying the impending US invasion of Iraq in 2003. His speech at the United Nations Security Council, claiming Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, has gone down in history as a byword for the "big lie."

There is not a single major instance of US military aggression over four decades in which Colin Powell did not play a significant role. After enlisting in the ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) at City College of New York, Powell entered the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant and was dispatched to Vietnam, first as an "advisor" for a South Vietnamese battalion in 1963, then as an operations officer in a US division in 1968, in the wake of the Tet Offensive.

After returning to the Pentagon and going back to school for an MBA, he was talent-spotted by the Nixon White House and selected as a White House fellow at the Office of Management and Budget. There he met Caspar Weinberger and Frank Carlucci, Nixon aides who would bring him into top positions when they returned to power under Republican Ronald Reagan in 1981. Weinberger was Secretary of Defense and named now-Brigadier General Powell as his chief military assistant in 1983.

Powell first came to public notice in the Iran-Contra scandal. As the *Bulletin,* the US predecessor to the *WSWS,* reported at the time on the testimony of Lt. Col. Oliver North, the deputy national security advisor: "North said that he discussed the secret arms shipments to Iran with at least four Pentagon officials: Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, his aide Gen. Colin Powell, Noel Koch, Pentagon chief for special operations, and [assistant secretary of defense Richard] Armitage. Powell has since been elevated to the No. 2 position at the National Security Council."

In other words, Powell replaced Oliver North after the exposure of the secret arms sales to Iran to finance the illegal arming of the Nicaraguan Contras. Within a year, the scandal also forced the resignation of Adm. John Poindexter, the national security advisor who had overseen the illegal operation. Powell was promoted to replace him as Reagan's last national security advisor.

The incoming administration of George H.W. Bush was not ungrateful for this political service. In August 1989, Bush named Powell chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top uniformed position in the US military, jumping over 14 more senior generals. In that capacity, Powell was the president's chief military adviser during the US invasion and occupation of Panama in December 1989, in which US forces rapidly overran the small country and seized its leader, Manuel Noriega, a bloody military ruler and longtime US intelligence asset who had fallen afoul of Washington.

This served as something of a dress rehearsal for a much larger and more consequential act of aggression: the Persian Gulf War, in which the US military deployed 500,000 troops to the Middle East in response to the seizure of Kuwait by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (an action he had been led to believe had US approval). Powell and Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney played the main roles in engineering the US military slaughter of an ill-trained and poorly equipped Iraqi army, which had no ability to defend itself against an all-out aerial bombardment, followed by a full-scale ground war with the most modern weaponry.

In the course of this one-sided bloodbath, Powell declared, "Our strategy in going after this army is very simple. First, we're going to cut it off, and then we're going to kill it." His blunt advocacy of

mass killing became known as the "Powell doctrine," and the antithesis of the supposedly gradual warfare that characterized Vietnam: apply overwhelming force, annihilate the enemy quickly, then pull out.

This was easier to apply against Saddam Hussein's conscript army trapped in the desert than against highly motivated Vietnamese liberation fighters operating in the jungle, but the military victory was proclaimed proof of Powell's genius. After overseeing one final act of aggression under the Bush administration, the 1992 US invasion of Somalia, he retired to media accolades and pleas from both capitalist parties that he run for high office. Powell declared himself publicly as a Republican but decided against seeking elective office, preferring to bide his time until the next Republican president.

George W. Bush named Powell his secretary of state in December 2000. It came at a critical time: only days after the U.S. Supreme Court, in its infamous *Bush v. Gore* decision, halted vote-counting in Florida and awarded the state's electoral votes, and with it the presidency, to the Republican candidate. Gore conceded, telling advisers that he could not become president over the wishes of the military. Bush's selection of a former general as his first appointment was a further indication of the decisive role of the military in the US political crisis.

Powell was Secretary of State throughout Bush's first term in office, which encompassed the 9/11 attacks, the US invasion of Afghanistan, and the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. It says something about the drastic shift to the right in the American ruling class that Powell, the combat soldier and advocate of overwhelming force, ended up as the last advocate of diplomacy in an administration wedded to aggression and military conquest as the axis of its foreign policy.

The infighting within the Bush administration seemed to take the form of a "good cop, bad cop" routine, with Powell clashing sometimes with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, at other times with Vice President Dick Cheney. Almost invariably this would end with a right-wing militarist policy being carried out. On occasion, if Powell had his way, there would be a bit of diplomatic sophistry, but more frequently Bush chose brazen arrogance.

The most notorious episode in Powell's four years heading the State Department came in February 2003, when he was dispatched to the United Nations to plead the Bush administration's case that Saddam Hussein was in possession of "weapons of mass destruction" and that he had secretly allied himself with Al Qaeda, and therefore was ultimately responsible for the 9/11 attacks. There is no question that Bush preferred that Powell make the case, since he had been built up by the media as the "reasonable" face of the administration, even something of a "dove," who refrained from the bloodcurdling rhetoric of Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

"Every statement I make today," Powell told the Security Council, "is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we are giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid evidence." As would be proven in a few months, after the US invasion and conquest of Iraq, the "facts" and "evidence" were a pack of lies. There were no weapons of mass destruction. Al Qaeda was a bitter enemy of the secular Ba'athist regime in Baghdad, not an ally. American imperialism plunged the country, and the Middle East as a whole, into a cauldron of war, mass suffering and society-wide destruction from which it has yet to emerge. And Colin Powell was one of the principal instigators.

Powell's speech was aimed primarily at intimidating public opinion in the United States. The Democratic Party immediately jumped to support the war, including, as the WSWS pointed out at the time, Senator Joe Biden of Delaware, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

For Powell, however, it was the beginning of the end of his political usefulness to the Bush war cabinet. He lingered in office until after Bush won reelection and then was shoved out the door unceremoniously, replaced by Bush's national security advisor Condoleezza Rice. He continued to defend the Iraq war, telling the Associated Press in 2012, "I think we had a lot of successes," adding "Iraq's terrible dictator is gone." And so are one million Iraqis, and 5,000 American soldiers, and hundreds of thousands more wounded and mentally crippled.

Thereafter, Powell made a few waves in capitalist politics, breaking with the Republican Party to endorse Barack Obama for president in 2008, and then appearing at the Democratic National Convention as a featured speaker in August 2020, on behalf of Biden and Kamala Harris.

The most important characteristic of Powell's rise is also its most ominous for the future. He was the prototype of the political general, a man who made his career not because of success in war—as gloomy as that would be—but because of success in backroom infighting within the Pentagon and White House. He was not so high up that he suffered ignominy from the US defeat in Vietnam. Thereafter, he profited from the sponsorship of powerful patrons like Weinberger, Carlucci, and George H. W. Bush. Their investment proved highly advantageous for both sides.

Today, such military-political figures abound. Some, like David Petraeus, have flamed out. Others, like Mark Milley, have acquired media notoriety and are acclaimed as saviors of democracy for resisting Trump's drive for fascist rule. Although, as the WSWS has pointed out, a democracy that depends on the sufferance of top generals is not really a democracy at all: It is merely waiting for the "right" dictator. More insidiously, lower-ranking military officers and intelligence agents now comprise a sizeable portion of the congressional Democratic Party and exercise a virtual veto power over the policies of the Biden administration.

In the death of Colin Powell, the US ruling elite extracts one last service: perfuming the decay of American democracy with hosannas about his life as a role model for minority youth. Using the rhetoric of identity politics, American imperialism seeks to disguise its predatory nature.

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