

Powell at the UN: Another Step Forward on the Road to Baghdad

By Ian Williams

Colin Powell's presentation did not immediately effect any road to Baghdad conversion in the UN Security Council, but it was not intended to. As advertised, the evidence contained no smoking guns, and since much of what Powell said was sourced to anonymous defectors, it lacked the dramatic conviction of a named and visible witness. However, it was more effective in reinforcing the existing suspicions of Security Council members that Iraq was hiding weapons programs from inspectors.

He was much less effective in persuading other members of Iraqi links with al Qaeda. Most of the speakers in the Security Council politely ignored that part of his presentation, presuming it was aimed for internal American consumption, since it clearly has strictly limited export potential. Even Tony Blair has been backpedaling on this version of "Six Degrees of Separation," since he seems to listen more to his own intelligence agencies than does President George W Bush—and he has to confront a skeptical House of Commons.

Ironically, Powell's speech certainly also convinced many members that the U.S. had been holding back information from the UN inspectors, leading to a gently implicit rebuke to Washington. Council members repeatedly called on "all countries" to share immediately any evidence they have with Messrs Blix and El Baradei. What they were asking in a timorously polite way was, "why did you not tell the inspectors?" After all Powell himself had said that they were "inspectors, not detectives," so why not provide the occasional clue?

Others noted the usual mismatch between what the Washington rumor-mill promised and what actually appeared. Powell did not substantiate the allegations that the Iraqis had learned hours

ahead of surprise inspections and cleared the sites. That had led to allegations of leaks from the UN, since some people in Washington, even when the organization is doing their bidding, can never resist a kick at it.

While the presentation, unsurprisingly, added to British Foreign Minister Jack Straw's conviction that the time had run out for Iraq, all other delegates drew different conclusions: the need for multilateral consensus and to work through the United Nations. They called for stronger support for the inspectors, enhancing and reinforcing their teams, and called upon Iraq for cooperation. Significantly, though, only the Iraqi ambassador actually tried in anyway to rebut what Mexico's Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez called the "valuable information" offered by Powell.

However, it is almost certainly misreading Powell's intention to judge his performance by whether or not he convinced the Security Council, or indeed the outside world, of Iraq's guilt. The real message being presented was that Washington is on a short fuse, and that while it would like the United Nations to go along, the United States is prepared to go it alone.

This message should be parsed in the context of last year's threat to close down all peacekeeping operations if the U.S. did not get its way over exemptions for the International Criminal Court. Powell's presentation was not an ultimatum to Iraq—but to other Council members. The U.S. is prepared to wreck the organization if it does not get its own way on this.

Winds of War

And through the fog of diplomacy, there were noticeable signs of the way the wind is blowing.

A visible line in the sand is being drawn on the issues of Iraqi acquiescence on overflights by U2 spy planes and on unaccompanied interviews of scientists. Several speeches by “Old Europeans” and other opponents of quick war endowed these two issues with increased significance, while it is also clear that results of the upcoming visit of Hans Blix and Mohamed El Baradei to Baghdad this weekend will be closely evaluated.

Although Iraq may well capitulate on the U2 front, it is unlikely to permit its scientists to be interviewed inside or outside the country by UN or U.S. officials. Powell’s sources for his statement that Saddam Hussein threatened death to any scientist who divulged information or left the country for an interview may be

anonymous. But if anything, he probably understated the case. Following recent regime practices with dissidents, the families of any Iraqi scientist who fully cooperated would suffer as well.

In the end, if Baghdad allows scientists to leave the country to be interviewed, and they speak, the game is up. If the Hussein regime does not meet the demand for unaccompanied interviews with Iraqi scientists, then the indications now are that this failure to cooperate will be used by many Council members to give the U.S. the war vote it wants. When Blix and El Baradei make their scheduled report to the Security Council on February 14, there will be a draft resolution hovering in the wings. Blix has pointed out that he does not have enforce-

ment capability, nor the capacity to subpoena the scientists. At the very least, he may have that after his next report.

Apparently, the formerly recalcitrant members of the Security Council believe that they have pushed Washington and its “willing coalition” as far as possible. Despite their expressed preference for peaceful means, there are now signs that they are in the process of adjusting themselves to give Colin Powell what he has asked for—which is, effectively, a go ahead for war before the tanks need extra air conditioning.

(Ian Williams

*<uswarreport@igc.org> is a UN
analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus
(online at www.fpif.org.)*