

Colin Powell on the Bush Administration's Iraq War Mistakes

By [Colin Powell](#) 5/13/12 at 12:00 AM

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Chaos in Baghdad

On the evening of Aug. 5, 2002, President Bush and I met in his residence at the White House to discuss the pros and cons of the Iraq crisis. Momentum within the administration was building toward military action, and the president was increasingly inclined in that direction.

I had no doubt that our military would easily crush a smaller Iraqi army, much weakened by Desert Storm and the sanctions and other actions that came afterward. But I was concerned about the unpredictable consequences of war. According to plans being confidently put forward, Iraq was expected to somehow transform itself into a stable country with democratic leaders 90 days after we took Baghdad. I believed such hopes were unrealistic. I was sure we would be in for a longer struggle.

I had come up with a simple expression that summarized this idea for the president: “If you break it, you own it.” It was shorthand for the profound reality that if we take out another country’s government by force, we instantly become the new government, responsible for governing the country and for the security of its people until we can turn all that over to a new, stable, and functioning government. We are now in charge. We have to be prepared to take charge.

“Taking Charge” is one of the first things a young Army recruit learns. The new soldier is taught how to pull guard duty—a mundane but essential task. Every recruit memorizes a set of rules describing how a guard performs his duty to standards. These rules are collectively known as the “General Orders.”

One of those guard-duty General Orders has stuck deeply in my head all these years and become a basic principle of my leadership style: a guard’s responsibility is “to take charge of this post and all government property in view.”

In the days, weeks, and months after the fall of Baghdad, we refused to react to what was happening before our eyes. We focused on expanding oil production, increasing electricity output, setting up a stock market, forming a new Iraqi government. These were all worth doing, but they had little meaning and were not achievable until we and the Iraqis took charge of this post and secured all property in view.

The Iraqis were glad to see Saddam Hussein gone. But they also had lives to live and families to take care of. The end of a monstrous regime didn’t feed their kids; it didn’t make it safe to cross town to get to a job. More than anything, Iraqis needed a sense of security and the knowledge that someone was in charge—someone in charge of keeping ministries from being burned down, museums from being looted, infrastructure from being destroyed, crime from exploding, and well-known sectarian differences from turning violent.

When we went in, we had a plan, which the president approved. We would not break up and disband the Iraqi Army. We would use the reconstituted Army with purged leadership to help us secure and maintain order throughout the country. We would dissolve the Baath Party, the ruling political party, but we would not throw every party member out on the street. In Hussein’s day, if you wanted to be a government official, a teacher, cop, or postal worker, you had to belong to the party. We were planning to eliminate top party leaders from positions of authority. But lower-level officials and workers had the education, skills, and training needed to run the country.

The plan the president had approved was not implemented. Instead, Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, our man in charge in Iraq, disbanded the Army and fired Baath Party members down to teachers. We eliminated the very officials and institutions we should have been building on, and left thousands of the most highly skilled people in the country jobless and angry—prime recruits for insurgency. These actions surprised the president, National Security Adviser Condi Rice, and me, but once they had been set in motion, the president felt he had to support Secretary Rumsfeld and Ambassador Bremer.

We broke it, we owned it, but we didn't take charge—at least until 2006, when President Bush ordered his now famous surge, and our troops, working with new Iraqi military and police forces, reversed the slide toward chaos.

Unreliable Sources

You can't make good decisions unless you have good information and can separate facts from opinion and speculation. Facts are verified information, which is then presented as objective reality. The rub here is the verified. How do you verify verified? Facts are slippery, and so is verification. Today's verification may not be tomorrow's. It turns out that facts may not really be facts; they can change as the verification changes; they may only tell part of the story, not the whole story; or they may be so qualified by verifiers that they're empty of information.

My warning radar always goes on alert when qualifiers are attached to facts. Qualifiers like: My best judgment ... I think ... As best I can tell ... Usually reliable sources say ... For the most part ... We've been told ... and the like. I don't dismiss facts so qualified, but I'm cautious about taking them to the bank.

"We broke Iraq, we owned it, but we didn't take charge," says Powell. Tim Sloan / AFP-Getty Images

Over time I developed for my intelligence staffs a set of four rules to ensure that we saw the process from the same perspective and to take off their shoulders some of the burden of accountability:

Tell me what you know.

Tell me what you don't know.

Then tell me what you think.

Always distinguish which is which.

What you know means you are reasonably sure that your facts are corroborated. At best, you know where they came from, and you can confirm them with multiple sources. At times you will not have this level of assurance, but you're still pretty sure that your analysis is correct. It's OK to go with that if it's all you have, but in every case, tell me why you are sure and your level of assurance.

During the 1991 Gulf War, our intelligence community was absolutely certain that the Iraqi Army had chemical weapons. Not only had the Iraqi Army used them in the past against their own citizens and against Iran, but there was good evidence of their continued existence. Based on this assessment, we equipped our troops with detection equipment and protective gear, and we trained them to fight in such an environment.

What you don't know is just as important. There is nothing worse than a leader believing he has accurate information when folks who know he doesn't don't tell him that he doesn't. I found myself in trouble on more than one occasion because people kept silent when they should have spoken up. My infamous speech at the U.N. in 2003 about Iraqi WMD programs was not based on facts, though I thought it was.

The Iraqis were reported to have biological-agent production facilities mounted in mobile vans. I highlighted the vans in my speech, having been assured that the information about their existence was multiple-sourced and solid. After the speech, the mobile-van story fell apart—they didn't exist. A pair of facts then emerged that I should have known before I gave the speech. One, our intelligence people had never actually talked to the single source—nicknamed Curveball—for the information about the vans, a source our intelligence people considered flaky and unreliable. (They should have had several sources for their information.) Two, based on this and other information no one passed along to me, a number of senior analysts were unsure whether or not the vans existed, and they believed Curveball was unreliable. They had big don't knows that they never passed on. Some of these same analysts later wrote books claiming they were shocked that I had relied on such deeply flawed evidence.

Yes, the evidence was deeply flawed. So why did no one stand up and speak out during the intense hours we worked on the speech? "We really don't know that! We can't trust that! You can't say that!" It takes courage to do that, especially if you are standing up to a view strongly held by a superior or to the generally prevailing view, or if you really don't want to acknowledge ignorance when your boss is demanding answers.

The leader can't be let off without blame in these situations. He too bears a burden. He has to relentlessly cross-examine the analysts until he is satisfied he's got what they know and has sanded them down until they've told

him what they don't know. At the same time, the leader must realize that it takes courage for someone to stand up and say to him, "That's wrong." "You're wrong." Or: "We really don't know that." The leader should never shoot the messenger. Everybody is working together to find the right answer. If they're not, then you've got even more serious problems.

Tell me what you think. Though verified facts are the golden nuggets of decision making, unverified information, hunches, and even wild beliefs may sometimes prove to be just as important. Many intelligence analysts and experts believed the Iraqis would use chemical weapons. That was their opinion. The facts could be taken either way. My own judgment was that they wouldn't use them. There was too much to lose. We had communicated to them that we would respond in an asymmetric way if they did, and we left them to imagine what that might be. They were aware of our capabilities.

I further believed that we could fight through any Iraqi chemical attacks. The possible effects back home worried me—public outrage and near-hysterical reactions. But I felt we could manage these. In making these judgments, I was relying on my experience and instincts. If I was wrong, the responsibility and accountability would be upon me and not the intelligence community.

It turned out that the Iraqis did not use chemical weapons.

Always distinguish which is which. I want as many inputs as time, staff, and circumstances allow. I weigh them all—corroborated facts, analysis, opinions, hunches, informed instinct—and come up with a course of action. There's no way I can do that unless you have carefully placed each of them—facts, opinions, analysis, hunches, instinct—in their proper boxes.

Years ago, one of my best friends, then-major general Butch Saint, got thrown out of the Army chief of staff's office for delivering bad news about one of the chief's favorite programs. Butch knew before he walked in that he was entering the lion's den, and he wasn't surprised when he got thrown out. Word quickly spread around the Pentagon, as it always does when things like that happen. Not long after I heard about it I ran into Butch in a hallway. As we walked along, I offered him comforting words. "Hey," he said quietly, "he don't pay me to give him happy talk." I have never forgotten that. Butch retired as a four-star general.

The Burning Fuse of Abu Ghraib

THERE'S an old Army story about a brand-new second lieutenant just out of airborne jumpmaster school who is supervising his first drop-zone exercise. He is standing there by the drop zone—a big, open field—watching the approaching planes. Standing next to him is a grizzled old sergeant who has been through this hundreds of times. The lead planes will be dropping artillery, trucks, and ammunition.

Everything is looking good and the lieutenant gives the OK to drop. The first chute comes out and deploys fully. The second one is a streamer and doesn't deploy. It hits the first one, which collapses. Subsequent chutes get caught up in the mess and they all start hitting the ground at full speed. Pieces of wreckage are flying everywhere, gasoline fires break out, touching off the ammunition and starting a brush fire that rapidly spreads into the surrounding woods.

The young lieutenant stands there contemplating the disaster. He finally says to the sergeant, "Umm, Sarge, do you think we should call someone?" His patient reply, "Well, Lieutenant, I don't rightly know how you are going to keep it a secret."

Staffs try like the devil to delay as long as possible passing bad news to the boss. That suits some bosses, but it never suited me. I had a standing rule for my staffs: "Let me know about a problem as soon as you know about it." Everyone knows the old adage: bad news, unlike wine, doesn't get better with time.

In 2003 American soldiers and interrogators in charge of Iraq prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad subjected prisoners to horrendous abuse, torture, and humiliation. Their actions were shocking and clearly illegal.

Late that year, one of the soldiers stationed at the prison reported the abuses to his superiors and said that photos had been taken by the abusers. The commanders in Iraq immediately took action and took steps to launch an investigation. Soon after, the news reached Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who told the president in early January 2004 that incidents at Abu Ghraib were being looked into. It seems that nobody told these senior leaders that these incidents were truly horrendous. Gen. Ricardo

Sanchez, the overall military commander in Iraq, announced the investigation on Jan. 12. Soldiers were suspended from duty during pending disciplinary action.

The machinery was working, but not all of it. The pipes leading up to the senior leader were never turned on. The Abu Ghraib photos were available to senior Pentagon leaders, but it does not appear that Secretary Rumsfeld saw them, nor were they shown at the White House. A fuse was burning, but no one made the senior leadership aware that a bomb was about to go off.

In late April, CBS's *60 Minutes* broke the story wide open. They had obtained the photos and showed them on the air. The bomb went off and all hell broke loose.

I was shocked when I saw the photos. How could American soldiers do this? How could the implications of their eventually becoming public not set off alarm bells at the Pentagon and White House? Why was there no action at the top? Don Rumsfeld had been around a long time. If they had known what was going on, he and his staff would have immediately realized the dimensions of the crisis. So would the president's staff. And yet nearly four months went by and no one had elevated the material up the chain to the secretary or the president.

If that had happened, the problem would not have been magically solved, but the people at the top would have had time to decide how to deal with the disaster and get to the bottom of it. The president was not told early.

Leaders should train their staffs that whenever the question reaches the surface of their mind—"Umm, you think we should call someone?"—the answer is almost always, "Yes, and five minutes ago." And that's a pretty good rule for life, if you haven't yet set your woods on fire.

With early notification, we can all gang up on the problem from our different perspectives and not lose time.

As I have told my staff many times over the years, if you want to work for me, don't surprise me. And when you tell me, tell me everything.

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