

WASHINGTON POST – NOVEMBER 16TH 2004

Analysis

Moves Cement Hard-Line Stance On Foreign Policy

By Glenn Kessler

By accepting Secretary of State Colin L. Powell's resignation, President Bush appears to have taken a decisive turn in his approach to foreign policy.

Powell's departure -- and Bush's intention to name his confidante, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, as Powell's replacement -- would mark the triumph of a hard-edged approach to diplomacy espoused by Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. Powell's brand of moderate realism was often overridden in the administration's councils of power, but Powell's presence ensured that the president heard divergent views on how to proceed on key foreign policy issues.

But, with Powell out of the picture, the long-running struggle over key foreign policy issues is likely to be less intense. Powell has pressed for working with the Europeans on ending Iran's nuclear program, pursuing diplomatic talks with North Korea over its nuclear ambitions and taking a tougher approach with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Now, the policy toward Iran and North Korea may turn decidedly sharper, with a bigger push for sanctions rather than diplomacy. On Middle East peace, the burden for progress will remain largely with the Palestinians.

Moreover, in elevating Rice, Bush is signaling that he is comfortable with the direction of the past four years and sees little need to dramatically shift course. Powell has had conversations for six months with Bush about the need for a "new team" in foreign policy, a senior State Department official said. But in the end only the key official who did not mesh well with the others -- Powell -- is leaving.

"My impression is that the president broadly believes his direction is correct," said former House speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.).

Rice sometimes backed Powell in his confrontations with Cheney and Rumsfeld, but more often than not she allowed the vice president and the defense secretary to have enormous influence over key diplomatic issues. More to the point, she is deeply familiar with the president's thinking on foreign policy -- and can be expected to ride herd on a State Department bureaucracy that some conservatives have viewed as openly hostile to the president's policies. The departures of Powell and his deputy, Richard L. Armitage, could trigger a wholesale reshuffling of top State Department officials.

"Condi knows what the president wants to accomplish and agrees with it," said Gary Schmitt, director of the Project for the New American Century, a think tank that frequently reflects the views of hard-liners in the administration. "One of Powell's weaknesses is that even when he signed on to the president's policy, he was not effective in managing the building to follow the policy as well."

Of course, senior officials often become advocates of the bureaucracies they head. For decades, there has been an institutional split between the State and Defense departments -- though many say the battles in Bush's first term were especially intense -- and so ultimately Rice may find herself in conflict with her Cabinet colleagues over the best diplomatic approach.

Danielle Pletka, vice president of the American Enterprise Institute, said she doubts the battles will end, even if the top officials are less divided on ideology. "This has nothing to do with Colin Powell or Don Rumsfeld or Condi Rice," she said. "This is a time of real turmoil, a crossroads in history, and figuring out how to deal with these things is not a smooth plot where everything unrolls easily from beginning to end."

For the rest of the world, Powell was considered a sympathetic ear in an administration that often appeared tone-deaf to other nations' concerns. There will be "teeth-gnashing" over Powell's departure by many foreign officials, said Samuel R. "Sandy" Berger, national security adviser in President Bill Clinton's second term. "Colin was the side door they could get into when they could not get through the front door."

"The president ultimately set the course," Berger added. "Colin has had a hard hand to play over the last several years in selling policies not popular to allies."

Powell had long indicated he planned to leave when Bush's first term ended. But with Rumsfeld under fire for his handling of the Iraq war, particularly the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, and new opportunities for peacemaking in the Middle East after the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, some people close to Powell detected hints he might consider staying for a period of time in the second term -- in part to burnish his legacy.

Powell has had a mixed and frustrating tenure as secretary of state, with his most memorable moment -- his 2003 speech to the United Nations making the case that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that were later never found -- arguably also his lowest point. The U.N. speech tarnished Powell's legacy, even though his personal popularity remains high -- both among the public and inside the State Department.

Much of Powell's tenure was marked by fierce battles with his bureaucratic foes and by few lasting achievements in key foreign policy areas. Under his watch, North Korea added to its arsenal of nuclear weapons and Iran has advanced dramatically in building a nuclear weapon. The invasion of Iraq was ordered by Bush despite Powell's misgivings, and Powell was often frustrated as he tried to steer U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Powell did, however, champion a new approach to development aid, tied to whether a country advances in building political and economic institutions.

A senior State Department official said that Powell's resignation was almost a foregone conclusion given the tension Powell had with the president, Cheney and Rumsfeld. Powell just never fit: Bush had to ask for reassurance that Powell would be with him in the Iraq war, Powell believed Cheney had a "fever" about al Qaeda and Iraq, and Powell felt Rumsfeld was never straightforward, practicing his "rubber gloves" approach of never taking a stand in the inner council, this official said.

The bad blood between Cheney and Powell dates to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when Cheney, then the defense secretary, felt that Powell sometimes failed to keep him informed, and even tried to exclude him from some aspects of war planning. In his 1996 autobiography, "My American Journey," Powell expressed some puzzlement about Cheney's character. As a leader of congressional Republicans, he wrote, Cheney "preferred losing on principle to winning through further compromise."

Staff writer Thomas E. Ricks contributed to this report.

