

Imagery Intelligence Of U.S. Blurred

by Ray McGovern

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Two weeks after what initially seemed to be a triumph at the UN, Secretary of State Powell has taken some major hits to his credibility. His defensiveness can be seen in his undiplomatic trashing of the French for being “afraid” to take responsibility for making war on Iraq.

To what can we attribute Powell’s “losing it” with the French and the drop in his credibility? One obvious factor was his imaginative but unpersuasive attempt to connect a rosary of dots to demonstrate a connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda. The unintended consequence was to show once again that the evidence described by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as “bulletproof” is in fact full of holes. But that was generally known. What was unexpected was the way Powell played fast and loose interpreting the imagery he displayed at the Security Council. . . .

For his penance, Powell had to sit still Friday [Feb. 14] while a Council employee gave him a lecture from the textbook for Rhetoric 101. Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix poked an embarrassing hole in a conclusion Powell drew on Feb. 5 from two satellite images of an Iraqi chemical facility. Powell had shown that decontamination trucks seen on the first image were no longer present on the second, which was taken on Dec. 22, the day a UN inspection team arrived. He offered this sequence as evidence that Iraq “had been tipped off to the forthcoming inspections.” On Friday, Blix calmly pointed out that “the two satellite images of the site were taken several weeks apart,” something Powell had neglected to mention. Hence, said Blix, the removal of the trucks—whenever it actually took place—“could just as easily have been a routine activity.” Powell offered no rebuttal.

The irony is that he did not need to overreach the evidence. Proving that Iraq was in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 was a no-brainer. Blix had already done so a few days before Powell spoke on Feb. 5. But the White House apparently decided that if Saddam Hussein’s perfidy could be proven three times over, the result would be an automatic *Ergo* for war.

Predictably, this backfired—not only at the UN but also in the streets of the world’s major cities. Skepticism leapt from the placards carried by millions of marchers. . . .

Agency’s Independence Lost

Imagery intelligence is likely to play an increasingly important role in coming weeks, so it is worth giving some attention to the pressures that can make its interpretation and public release suspect.

In his autobiography, Colin Powell included a highly instructive vignette from the Gulf War in 1991. American forces were having no luck finding and destroying Iraqi Scud surface-to-surface missiles before they could be launched at Israel and elsewhere. So it was with welcome surprise that Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, heard that Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf had told the press that several Scuds had been located and destroyed on their launchers. Before Powell had time to rejoice, though, his intelligence chief warned that an imagery analyst on Schwarzkopf’s own staff had concluded that what had been destroyed were not Scuds but oil tanker trucks.

Powell called Schwarzkopf at once, but Schwarzkopf bad-mouthed the imagery analyst and delivered himself of such a rich string of expletives that Powell decided to let the story stand—a decision he regretted the next day when CNN showed photos of the destroyed Jordanian oil tankers.

Where is Powell to turn now for imagery analysis not subject to command influence or the exigencies of policy? The answer is: nowhere. The Central Intelligence Agency’s National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) offered that service until 1996, when CIA Director John Deutch ceded it—lock, stock, and barrel—to the Pentagon. One practical effect was the immediate departure, in droves, of seasoned imagery analysts who moved to other jobs at CIA. The damage could be seen all too plainly in the years that followed: in the failure to detect India’s preparations to test a nuclear weapon in 1998, for example; and in the mistaken bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999.

Against this background, Powell’s emphasis, in his UN speech, on the importance of the “years and years of experience” needed by imagery analysts, had a poignant ring to those of us who witnessed the demise of NPIC—the proud discoverer of Soviet missiles in Cuba, and “trust-but-verify” guarantor of strategic arms control agreements.

The independence enjoyed by NPIC to resist command influence and departmental bias was as important an asset as the long years of experience of its veteran analysts. Are there imagery analysts who are still free to “tell it like it is”; experts with some assurance that their careers will not suffer if the evidence leads them to judgments that they know their bosses will not welcome? (Someone should look into what happened to that imagery analyst on Schwarzkopf’s staff who made the correct call on the Scud-like oil tankers in 1991.)

Whether the *non sequitur* for which Powell was gently chided by Dr. Blix was a result of inexperience, a desire to please, or both, Powell and other senior policymakers need to look with jaundiced eye on the imagery intelligence coming out of the Pentagon. And so do we all.