

The Tragedy of Colin Powell; or, the Moor of Washington

(anon.; sometimes blamed on Mick Stern)

SCENE ONE: The Chamber of State

POWELL

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by global warming
Once in the service of King George the Elder
I sailed with vast armada
to thwart the warlike ambitions of Saddam the Insane
After that victory
no future in the political heavens
did shine brighter than mine own
Then disaster struck – the son of George became king
Young George W understands the intricacies of statecraft
no better than a chicken understands the alphabet
and his weak and feckless character
makes him a pawn of malign wills
stronger than his own. I mean Cheney, Rove, and Rummy.
When they invited me to join them in the cabinet,
I hesitated, but what could I do?
I am a soldier, and must obey orders.
Besides, many predict that this Cabinet position
will advance me in my goal
to become the first Moor to rule over the kingdom!
But from these speculations I remain aloof
and thus fan the flames of my popularity
by seeming not to care.
But hark! What heavy step echos through the corridors
at this late hour, what midnight presence
thickens the dismal gloom,
makes the owl screech with fright,
and scatters even the loathsome bats?

Enter Cheney

CHENEY

Tis I, Cheney, Lord Haliburton.

POWELL

My lord Haliburton, what brings you out of your undisclosed cave
on this moonless night?

CHENEY

I was bitten by a German vampire
and infected with an insatiable hunger for power
Since then I cannot stand the light of day,
and my business cannot stand it either.

POWELL

I feel a deathly chill.

CHENEY

Funny, I don't feel anything. But I never do.
Enough preamble, to business straight.
Among the Mohammedans there a few who grow insolent of late.
We need only some slight pretext
to mount a general crusade against all of 'em.

POWELL

What sort of crusade?

CHENEY

Why, the only sort I know of. The sort that sends fleets of heavily armed men over great
distances to slaughter complete strangers.

POWELL

No, this need not be! Heed now an old soldier's wisdom. We must pick our fights
carefully, attack with force overwhelming, and always have an "exuent" strategy. This
crusade of yours seems hasty and ill-advised. Prudence must be our motto and our daily
guide. You're not listening.

CHENEY

No, *you're* not listening. The course is already set, the wheels are in motion, so now we
must cry havoc and unleash the Wolfowitz of war!

A scary wolf HOWLS OS.

CHENEY (CON.)

I hear him in his lupine office, calling for blood.

POWELL

How can you contemplate the hellish consequences of war with such cool detachment?

CHENEY

In place of a heart, I have an artificial mechanism that beats at the prime lending rate. Now I must be gone, but I warn you, do not attempt to oppose my will!

Exit Cheney

VOICE OS

Powell! Powell!

POWELL

What now?

(loud voice)

I'm sorry, I'm busy and I can't come to the castle gate right now. When I say beep, state your business and begone. Beep!

Enter Rummy.

RUMMY

Forget it, Powell. I know you screen your calls. So I just went around the screen.

POWELL

Rummy! The horse's ass of the Apocalypse! What ill wind wafts you hither? Never mind, I don't really want to know.

RUMMY

Be careful, Lord Powell. There are things we don't want to know, and we know why we don't want to know them; there are things we don't know and we know why we don't want to know them, and there are things we don't even want to know why we don't want to know them.

POWELL

Your conversation makes as much sense as your war plans.

RUMMY

What plans? I have no plans. I make plots, not plans.

POWELL

What do you mean, you make no plans.

RUMMY

There is no need to make any, you simple soldier. I merely improvise. I command as I please, when I please, with no thought of the morrow.

POWELL

Very well, then. I will order full review of the dangers ahead, and anticipate every dire scenario. We must be ready to stifle insurrection with quick force, to replace turmoil with civic order, to gain respect by treating the defeated with dignity. Hey, pay attention, wilya? This is no soliloquy!

RUMMY

If you send me a memo covering those points, I'll be glad to hang it in my outhouse.

POWELL

Such reckless arrogance will lead to chaos!

A wolf HOWLS.

RUMMY

You say "chaos" like it's a bad thing. But it serves us well. When you rock the ship of state, everyone calls for a strong hand on the rudder and a steady course, even if the dread iceberg looms ahead.

POWELL

Scoundrel!

RUMMY

In times of war, fear makes the masses docile, like lambs. The government assumes unheard of powers. The price of olive oil soars. And Lord Cheney can find employment for his three rapacious nephews, Kellogg, Brown, and Root.

POWELL

Oh curséd swine!

RUMMY

Tension, apprehension, intervention have begun!

POWELL

Begone, take your diabolical plots with you.

RUMMY

But not my plans, for I have no plans. The less I plan, the more fun I have. I stand back and let the idiots do what they will, for if I give 'em a nod and a wink, they will go on a rampage. Those morons who guard the dungeons of Abu Ghraib? The very thought of them makes me laugh!

POWELL

What, no apologies? No regrets?

Rummy walks away.

RUMMY

No, and above all, no accountability.

(calling out)

Oh, Pandora! Pandora! Where art thou? I have a gift for you! You'll want to open it right away!

(fading)

Tension, apprehension, intervention have begun!

Exit Rummy.

POWELL

'Twill take more effort than I thought to thwart those two villains, but they cannot last long. The world will soon know that Rummy's a dummy, and Cheney's a zany. Their own arrogance will finish them off.

SCENE TWO – After midnight in the White Castle.

Enter King George in his pyjamas, followed by a Secret Service Sentry.

GEORGE

A Coors ! A Coors ! My kingdom for a Coors!

SENTRY

Sire, please return to bed. You know I cannot permit you to touch alcohol.

GEORGE

Bah, you're only here to protect me.

SENTRY

Protect you from yourself, Mr. King.

GEORGE

Condeleeeeeza! Condeleeza!

Enter Condi.

CONDI

Your Dumbness, what are you doing at this hour wandering around the White Castle in your royal pyjamas? You weren't looking for a drinkie-winkie, were you?

George shakes his head. The Sentry nods vigorously.

CONDI (CON.)

(to the sentry)

Get lost.

The Sentry exits.

CONDI (CON.)

Now that we are alone, Sire, feel free to speak thy mind.

(aside)

What little there is of it. If you lean close to the King, you can hear a dry rattle in his skull, like an marble rolling around in a washing machine.

GEORGE

I don't know, Condi, sometimes I wonder if it's really right, what Cheney and Rummy tell me. I mean about liberating Arabia from the Ay-rabs and all. Don't get me wrong, it's nice to have liberty—I would feel less free without it. But we're talkin' about an invasion, and some folks might see that as invasive.

CONDI

Are you getting cold feet, Sire? Art thou a weakling?

GEORGE

You miscomprehender me. If I start a war, people will ask why did I do it, and I'll have to come up with an exploitation.

CONDI

Your speechwriters and teleprompters will do that for you, Sire.

They will?

GEORGE

Yea, verily.

CONDI

(a beat)

My name is George. Not Valery.

GEORGE

Pardon me, Your Slowness.

CONDI

What time is it?

GEORGE

(yawning)

Time to act. Even as we speak, the jihad is on the march.

CONDI

I don't know ...

GEORGE

Sire, are you afraid of something?

CONDI

Condi, do you think Jesus loves me?

GEORGE

He loves you too much, Sire. That a man of your abilities became King is the most profound mystery since the Virgin Birth.

CONDI

It's not so easy being the king. Remember 9/11? What a day! We didn't know what hit us! Nobody did!

GEORGE

Enough of this snivelling! Gather thy courage! What if your father saw you now—you know his habit of parachuting unannounced onto the roof of the castle.

GEORGE

He always lectures me as if I was some kind of infantile.

CONDI

Revenge is at hand, Sire! You will do what he could not—topple the Beast of Baghdad. Your glory that will far surpass your father's.

GEORGE

That's right, I never thought of that. Dad will smile on the other side of his grin when he hears about my war!

CONDI

That's the spirit!

GEORGE

If we don't fight 'em over there, somebody else will!

CONDI

Sire, speechwriters...

GEORGE

If you're not one of us, you're two of them!

CONDI

Sire, relax

GEORGE

(loud)

Bring 'em on!

CONDI

Not yet, not yet ...

GEORGE

But—suppose it goes wrong?

CONDI

Your Dimness, in affairs of state, it matters not what you do, but only how you spin it.

GEORGE

Then spin, spin, spin! And fight, fight, fight!

George does some cheerleading steps.

CONDI

Sire, I am pleased you have found your inner GI Joe.

GEORGE

Thanks to you, Condi. Hey, look, it's your little dog! Did you leave your office door open?

Condi makes the motions of chasing the dog away.

CONDI

Out, damned Spot!

Exeunt Condi and King George

SCENE THREE: The Chamber of State

Colin Powell at his desk.

POWELL

I cannot sleep nights for thinking of the hazards and obstacles facing us this crusade. I write memo after memo to the Pentagon, but the five-sided shape of the building magically repels all common sense. What the devil is "Shock and Awe"? Isn't that the name of Cirque de Soleil's summer tour? I hear a shuffling noise outside.

TENET

(off stage)

Powell, you in there?

POWELL

You have reached Colin Powell. I am busy now. State your name and utter your message when I say beep. Beep!

TENET

(off stage, shouting)

Colin, this is Sir George Tenet, Duke of Langely and director of Cloaks, Intrigues, and Assassinations—otherwise known as CIA. I bear urgent news from the White Castle, whose lackeys we are.

POWELL

I have no doubt this news will be displeasing, but come in and have done with it.

Enter Tenet.

TENET

I bring the evidences and proofs that Hussein the Insane is a danger to all. Thus the hostilities can commence, and a fearful nation's bellicose fantasies will at last come true.

A wolf howls off stage

POWELL

I will peruse these documents.

TENET

Commit them to memory, for the King has chosen you to present the case for war to the people. They still believe in you.

POWELL

“Still” ? What do you mean by “still,” you knave?

Powell opens the document, muttering.

POWELL (CON.)

“Still.” Hah!

(stops, reads intently)

Surely, my lord of Langley, you must be jesting. This is but a report on the transfer of sticks. Bundles of sticks! How canst thou call this a threat to our kingdom?

TENET

They intend to build catapults, my lord, giant catapults that fling stones through the air. Stones big enough to pulverize a cow.

POWELL

Perhaps they need these sticks to build fences or sheds.

TENET

Are you deaf? I said catapults. Write that down, put it in your speech. And say also that a rock launched in Baghdad can crush a herd of sheep in Ireland within forty-five minutes.

POWELL

Impossible!

TENET

My lord Powell, you obviously do not understand rock science.

POWELL

I will not abuse the public ear with these shabby fictions, I will not do it!

TENET

The Commander in Chief has given the order. And I have no words to describe the punishments that will befall you if you disobey.

POWELL

But if I present this insubstantial case to the people, their admiration might turn to scorn.

TENET

Relax! It's a slam dunk.

POWELL

You mean an easy victory?

TENET

No, I mean if anybody objects, we'll slam them in the gut and dunk them in water until they beg for mercy.

POWELL

So this is the price of power! I grow dizzy, sight fails my eyes, aye, I feel Doom breathing down my neck. No mouthwash can sweeten the breath of Doom, not even peppermint.

TENET

Make up your mind. Will you do it, or not do it?

POWELL

Is there a third choice?

TENET

Yes. Plunge a dagger into thine own heart.

POWELL

How about one more choice? The last one, I promise.

TENET

Enough! I must be off. I have a pile of intelligence reports to misinterpret.

POWELL

And I must face my fate.

TENET

Better you than me.

Exit Tenet

POWELL

(absent-mindedly)

Tension, apprehension, intervention have begun!

(angry)

Why can't I get that goddamn rhyme out of my head?

(takes center stage)

To do, or not to do,
that is the option.

Whether tis nobler in the media
to bear the slings and arrows of outrageous Fox News
or put blame on Cheney's opponents
and by lying, discredit them.

This so-called evidence will be a hard sell.
Should I abandon my loyalty to the king
or risk my popularity? Should I follow my orders
or my conscience? I must be true to my life
as an officer and a politician.

Therefore I'll try to have it both ways,
I will repeat these baseless accusations with straight face
and hope that in the wake of the invasion
we find a catapult or two
in the desert, aimed right at us.

Exit Powell briskly.

SCENE FOUR: In front of the crowd

Powell is in the middle of his speech.

POWELL

And so you see, we have proofs that the ruler of Baghdad acquired on the black market many bundles of sticks made of high-density oak, for his land has not this material. And he intends to use these sticks to make engines of war that can fling deadly rocks. His heart is bent on evil.

MAN

Prithee, may I speak? I am but an ordinary simpleton, and do not understand the principle that guides us. Are we to declare war on every evil duke and king on earth?

POWELL

We are not guided by principle, we are guided by Cheney.

MAN

Then we have nothing to worry about.

WOMAN

Your lordship, I'm afraid of the consequences of this unprovoked aggression.

POWELL

But Hussein has oaken sticks and giant catapults that throw stones. Sticks and stones can break your bones!

WOMAN

You speak not the truth.

POWELL

Nothing will sway us from our purpose. The troops gather in the desert even as I speak.

WOMAN

Your heavy handed intrusion will lead to disorder, destruction, even civil war. How propose you to mend such a situation?

POWELL

Why, we'll just send in all the king's horses and all the king's men. They never fail.

MAN

(applauding)

Hurray!

WOMAN

Boo! Boo!

MAN

Boo! Boo!

WOMAN

Hell's bells, man, what changed thy mind so fast?

MAN

I have no mind, I just do what everybody else does.

She turns her attention back to Powell.

WOMAN (CON)

Booo! Booo!

MAN

(like a sheep)

Baaah! Baaah!

POWELL

Even the sheep have turned against me! My career is over, my reputation ruined, and posterity will remember me as a spineless collaborator! If I didn't have such a good pension, I would kill myself.

SCENE FIVE: The Chamber of State

Colin Powell is standing at his desk putting things in a cardboard box.

Enter Condi.

POWELL

Condeleeza! Go away! It's still my office, at least until noon. It's not even eleven yet.

CONDI

I'll wait.

POWELL

Yo, I oughtta kick your lyin,' schemin' butt.

CONDI

You ain't gonna kick nothing. You jes a washed up old has-been. You already last week's news, and I'm still a playa.

There's a NOISE outside the office. Powell looks worried for a moment, puts his fingers to his lips.

POWELL

Shh! White folk listening.

CONDI

(whispering)

Mutha fucka!

(loud)

Ahem. In the interests of an orderly transition, allow me to encourage you to depart at your earliest convenience.

POWELL

Indeed, I have no wish to linger beyond my departure date. My work here is ended.

Enter King George

CONDI

Your majesty.

POWELL

Sire.

GEORGE

Too bad you have to leave, Colin. But don't worry, I'm sure Condi will do a much better job.

CONDI

How goes the war, Sire?

GEORGE

Peachy keen. Rummy tells me that stuff is happening. Well, good luck and fare thee well, Powell.

POWELL

Thank you. Mr. King, Ms. Rice, I wish you success in your ventures, no matter how immoral and impractical they may be.

CONDI

Well it's already successful. Cheney told me the other day that it's going to last a long, long time. It's not one of those quickie invasions. It's a real business with growth potential.

POWELL

So your majesty, you really meant it when you said ...

GEORGE

Mission accomplished!

CONDI

Amen!

CURTAINS
(for Iraq)