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"Powell's Mideast Success: It's Not Like Ordering a Pizza"

By Kenneth W. Stein | Special to the Sentinel

With virtual unanimity, an unscientific sampling of the Western media branded Secretary of State Colin Powell's recent mediation effort in Arab-Israeli diplomacy as a failure.

On April 18, the day Powell returned to the United States, Munich's Sueddeutsche Zeitung summed it up: "No cease-fire, no withdrawal by the Israelis from the Palestinian autonomous territories, no clear declaration of war by the Palestinians on the terror from their own ranks - - nothing, absolutely nothing was achieved by the Powell visit."

These assertions notwithstanding, Powell's trip was in fact a moderate success. When compared to earlier American efforts at Arab-Israeli mediation, Powell's accomplishments were all the more astonishing. Large obstacles stood in his path.

Media reporting assumed that mediation of a conflict required a tangible result. Ending 18 months of violence is not like stopping a cruise liner on a dime. Resolving issues of Jerusalem, borders, refugees, settlements and prerogatives of a future Palestinian state is not accomplished by ordering a pizza in several minutes. Media deadlines are inherently impatient. Did anyone remember that some of these same savants warned us that American engagement in Afghanistan would be a quagmire?

By comparison, no clamor for instant results accompanied reporting of Henry Kissinger's Middle East shuttle diplomacy in the early 1970s, nor was it demanded when it took Secretary of State James Baker 10 months to fashion the terms of reference for the 1991 Madrid Middle East Peace Conference.

Powell's main goal was to stop Palestinian-Israeli violence and reduce public tensions in many Arab countries. His broader mission was designed not to allow the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to clog possible future efforts to restrain or unseat Saddam Hussein. His method focused on establishing a timetable for a cease-fire/Israeli withdrawal and connecting it to a pathway to move from purely security discussions to a broader political outcome in the Palestinian-Israeli theater.

To do that he had to meet with Yasser Arafat, despite the Palestinian leader's known complicity in violent acts against Israelis. Moral clarity about making no compromises about terrorism was smudged. Powell's meetings with Arafat were a necessary means to broader ends.

Upon departure from the Middle East, Powell knew that the Israelis were not finished with their removal of terrorist centers; he was not sure if Arafat could control all elements of the Palestinian community. His chances at negotiating an agreement in several days were blocked by the lifelong repugnancy that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Arafat hold for each other. It was a level of leadership disdain unprecedented in the history of Arab-Israeli relations. Powell knew he could not wave a magic wand and turn Sharon and Arafat into clones of Mother Teresa. Why, therefore, would he even publicly promise a cease-fire and be embarrassed with its possible violation? What would that do for American credibility and a possible return engagement if mediation were needed again?

When Powell reached Israel this time, his special adviser, Major Gen. Anthony Zinni, had crafted four-fifths of the details for the Intifada's cease-fire. Details of what comes next in stages had been negotiated:

Public announcement of a cease-fire and renouncing violence in unequivocal terms.

Resumption of trilateral Palestinian-Israeli-U.S. security committee talks.

A series of Israeli withdrawals.

Commitments to halt the production, possession and smuggling of illegal weapons into Palestinian areas.

Israel's end of closure in the territories.

Economic and physical reconstruction of Palestinian areas.

Return to the pre-intifada status quo.

A halt of Israeli settlements and their expansion.

Opening Gaza airport and port.

And a winding down of inciteful language hurled at the other.

Powell's trip telescoped these security and administrative issues with a potential political outcome. Linking them to political negotiation or mere

management of them is possibly through a regional or international conference. And that discussion is ongoing. Powell succeeded in creating a promise for another possible series of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. That is not failure, especially after 18 months of violence. Will someone remind analysts and the media that context and perspective matter. Progress in process is measured over time. Diplomacy is not a fast-food restaurant.

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