

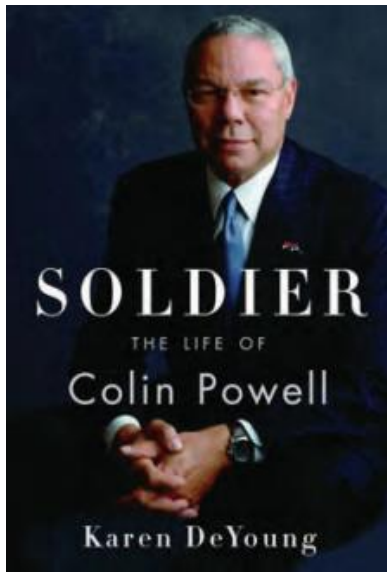
Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell

by Karen DeYoung

Alfred A. Knopp, New York, 2006 (ISBN 1-4000-4170-8)

Reviewed by John Anderson

Thirty years ago, Colin Powell was arguably the most powerful military leader in the world. Yet today, Powell seems to have largely slipped from the public consciousness, notwithstanding that, as Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff working directly for President Bush (Senior), he masterminded the planning for the First Gulf War.



But, notwithstanding these accomplishments, he was a remarkable figure in his own right: he was a formidable leader of men, very well-spoken, very intelligent — and he was black. Therefore, for me Powell has always been a fascinating historical figure.

Then, to add to the fascination, after retiring from the U.S. Army he agreed to come out of retirement to become Secretary of State in the administration of President Bush (Junior). This always seemed strange to me: a man with a stellar military reputation agreeing to become a political figure, especially because President Bush (Junior) and his colleagues seemed to be ideologically very different from Powell.

Powell's career in the U.S. Army was largely covered in his phenomenally successful autobiography published in 1995. But DeYoung's book is still helpful because a biographer can bring in sources and viewpoints other than those provided by the subject himself. DeYoung's book focuses on Powell's "political" career including his military appointment as National Security Adviser to President Reagan, as JCS Chair to Presidents Bush (Senior) and Clinton, and finally his political appointment as Secretary of State in the administration of President Bush (Junior).

The key question that has always bothered me is how Powell managed to reconcile his ideological differences with the other members of Bush Junior's cabinet. At the risk of giving away a large part of the book, the answer seems to be that Powell always considered himself, first and foremost, a soldier: when asked about apparent ideological differences, his answer was always something along the lines of, "I serve the President," in effect his commander-in-chief.

But the book also makes clear that Bush Junior needed Powell in his cabinet more than Powell wanted the job. Powell was an immensely popular public figure following his tour as Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, far more popular than Bush himself. His presence in the cabinet was seen as a moderating influence among the other more hawkish cabinet officers. Therefore, Bush went to considerable lengths to make sure that Powell stayed on side. But the low point was Powell's speech to the UN Security Council on 05 February 2003 wherein he attempted to lay out the evidence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Of course, we know now that that evidence was largely fabricated -- flimsy at best, definitely suspect -- but Powell at the time pointed out that everyone, including U.S. allies, was working from that same intelligence.

Then, as a measure of how much value Bush actually put on Powell's contribution as Secretary of State, at the end Powell was simply discarded without even the courtesy of a proper passing-out interview with the president, an incident highlighted in the first few chapters of the book.

A long book, 520 pages, written by a newspaperwoman. But it is not a telegraphic disjointed compilation of facts; it is a detailed narrative that reads well, albeit slowly. A very interesting book documenting one of the more important episodes in recent world history.

And there is a Canadian connection: the author, Karen DeYoung, is the widow of Henry Champ, a prominent and highly respected Canadian Washington-based commentator for both CBC and CTV, who died in 2012.

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