

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Speaking Truth: Washington's New Public Diplomacy Tactic ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Perhaps, just perhaps, Colin Powell's round of the Sunday talk shows marks the beginning of a new Bush administration approach to public diplomacy. In discussing Iraq Powell used a disarmingly simple public diplomacy tactic: he acknowledged reality.

Asked on ABC's "This Week" about the security situation in Iraq Powell replied "it's getting worse, and the reason it's getting worse is that they are determined to disrupt the elections."

By Sunday evening CNN International was leading its broadcasts with those remarks, speculating that Powell had revealed "a rift within the administration" over Iraq. Maybe. Or perhaps Powell simply said publicly what senior administration officials routinely say to one another in private. I badly want to believe that whatever ridiculous things the President and his spokespeople say publicly about Iraq that in private they see the mess for what it is.

Certainly they have been warned. A National Intelligence Estimate presented to the President and other top officials in July laid out three likely scenarios for Iraq, the best being more-or-less a continuation of the present situation and the worst an all-out civil war. Since this document leaked into the public domain earlier this month various officials have sought to downplay both its conclusions and its importance (on Sunday the overall commander of US forces in the Middle East, General John Abizaid, called it "overly pessimistic"). Speaking to Fox News on Sunday Powell, again, chose honesty over spin, saying the report "wasn't a terribly shocking assessment. It was something that I could have written myself."

This is the sort of thing we need more of. Simple acknowledgement that the sun rises in the east, and that saying so is not an act of disloyalty. Administration officials do not need to grovel in public and beg for forgiveness, but they do need to show their audiences – those here in the Middle East as well as American voters – that they understand there is a problem where America and the Middle East are concerned. Only through that basic act of leveling with the rest of us can they begin to restore American credibility, the base upon which all public diplomacy rests.
