

Colin Powell: The Great Evaluator?

Colin Powell has endorsed Obama for president. Obama touts that endorsement as evidence that he, Obama, is qualified for the presidency. Of course the value of the endorsement rests entirely on the public's faith that Powell is a man of skill, competence and experience who can distinguish those public officials who are able to guard the security of the United States from those who are inept. At least as important is the public's belief that Powell is a man of absolute integrity who would never render a favorable judgment of a person who did not warrant it.

However, Powell's record as Secretary of State in the wake of the 9/11 attacks proves the exact opposite: he is utterly incapable of recognizing incompetence in government officials no matter how severe the national security consequences of their negligence, and he will reward and promote those whose actions violated federal law and resulted in American loss of life.

It would be redundant at this date to go into very much detail about the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but to understand how unworthy of anyone's trust is Colin Powell we must review how his underlings in the State Department betrayed the people of the United States while he was in charge, and how he, instead of punishing them, rewarded them.

The nineteen 9/11 hijackers were given visas to enter the United States even though they precisely fit the terrorist profile. The 9/11 Commission named the three State Department officials who, collectively, were directly responsible for issuing these visas. The perpetrators were: Mary Ryan, Chief of Consular Affairs, appointed to that position in 1993; Maura Harty, Deputy Chief of Consular Affairs, appointed 1999; and Thomas Furey, Consul General in the US Embassy in Riyadh, appointed 2000. These Keystone Konsuls also gave visas to the 9/11 plot's "mastermind," Khalid Sheik Mohammed, and to other plotters who did not participate in the actual hijackings.

The Commission concluded that in every case these officials had violated the federal law governing issuance of visas. That law, the Immigration and Naturalization Act (INA), explicitly imposes on consular officials the obligation not to issue visas to applicants if "it appears to the consular officer, from statements in the application, or in the papers submitted therewith, that such alien is ineligible to receive a visa [under this], or any other provision of law, the application fails to comply with the provisions of this chapter, or the regulations issued thereunder," The INA goes on to describe many other bases for which State Department officials must deny visas, but you get the idea: if there's any basis for "reasonable" doubt, the visa must, by law be denied.

The Commission found that "*All 19 of the...hijacker [visa] applications were incomplete in some way with a data field left blank or not answered fully.*"¹), In addition, to the blank spaces there were many obviously false and evasive answers. None of this bothered these three fools.

Ryan, in her position as Chief of Consular Affairs bureau for the eight years prior to September 11 was *the* official most responsible for the elimination of procedures designed to weed out visa applicants

¹ 9/11 Commission Staff Monograph, *9/11 and Terrorist Travel*, p. 45

who posed a threat to the United States. What she did, said the Commission, amounted to waiving the requirement that Saudis obtain visas to visit the United States. The Commission concluded she had implemented these weak standards without legal authority and had done so in the face of the “CIA’s analyzed and reported” findings about rising Arab extremism in Saudi Arabia. The Commission noted that the “reasons for the State Department’s adoption of these visa policies in Saudi Arabia the UAE [United Arab Emirates] and Germany have never adequately been explained.”²

Maura Harty, as Deputy Chief of Consular Affairs, was the chief operating officer of the consular affairs division, the direct supervisor of the US Consul General in Saudi Arabia and his own subordinates. Along with Ryan, Harty was most responsible for institutionalizing and formalizing the negligent and unlawful practices they conceived, the benefits of which were so well demonstrated on 9/11.

The third member of this team of lawbreakers was Thomas Furey, Consul General in the US Embassy in Riyadh who arrived at this post a year to the day prior to the 2001 attacks. He did not formulate policy regarding visas, but he was right there, in Saudi Arabia. The 9/11 Commission staff interviewed Furey and stated that “Furey was adamant in his interview with the Commission that he did not think Saudis were security risks when he arrived in Riyadh [on September 11, 2000] or at any time before. And according to several sources he was not reluctant about expressing his desire to give visas to virtually anyone: among his colleagues he was known for frequently uttering the phrase: “people gotta have their visas.”³ As far as visas were concerned Furey certainly acted his beliefs. The rate of approval of Saudi applicants for US visas was over ninety eight percent.

Furey’s was an interpretation of immigration law that turned upside down his duty of care to his country, rather than requiring each and every visa applicant to bear the burden of proof that they were not a threat to American security (especially young single Arab men who, according to their own visa applications, lived in hotels and who did not know the names of their wives, the schools they were supposed to attend in the US, or their US destinations. He acted as though all applicants “gotta” be issued a visa unless perhaps they stated at the time of application that they planned to commit terrorist acts when they got to the USA.

The Commission staff, considering the question of whether Furey could possibly be as ignorant as he claimed, talked to lower level consular officers in Saudi Arabia to find out if they were as uninformed as their boss. When they asked State Department personnel in Saudi Arabia if they had any reason to believe Saudis were not threats to US security one responded: “That’s absurd; that’s patently ridiculous.”⁴ Furey’s staff all knew of the danger, but Furey, like a character in Gilbert and Sullivan said he did not. In a statement oozing with contempt the 9/11 staff stated their conclusion: “It is difficult to understand how the strong views of the [lower level] consular officers in Jeddah about the security risk posed by Saudi citizens—views informed by growing intelligence supporting their outlook and by commonsense

² Ibid. p.111

³ Ibid. p.125

⁴ Monograph p.122

conclusions from recent events, such as the East Africa bombings could apparently be unknown to [Furey] the most senior State Department official making visa policy in Saudi Arabia.”⁵

However, security concerns did not *entirely* escape notice by Furey, Harty and Ryan. The Commission revealed that in the cable traffic which passed between them they showed a great deal of concern about security threats *to the State Department officials in the consulates*. The Riyadh Embassy’s Resident Security Officer told the Commission staff that the embassy employees realized the large crowds congregating outside and inside the building waiting to apply for visas posed a security threat and they “were very sensitive to the fact that we were the most targeted embassy on Earth.”⁶

As a result, the three Keystone Konsuls jointly created a scheme they called “Visa Express,” a gimmick, implemented on June 1, 2001 that would finally rid the embassy and consulate grounds of dangerous Saudis. . . by getting them into the US at a faster rate.

Under Visa Express, much of the consular staff’s work was to outsourced to private Saudi travel agencies who would have responsibility of working with visa applicants to show them how to fill in the forms and remind them to provide answers that would pass muster. Thus if Abdul, a single, unmarried gentleman who was unemployed wanted to visit the US to go to school, or blow up a building, the travel agent (who would only profit if the visa were approved and an airplane ticket was actually sold) could remind Abdul that the Americans prefer that their visitors appear to have some reason to want to return home to Saudi Arabia. So before Abdul set pen to paper he would understand his chances of getting approved would be low unless he stated that he was married and employed, and it would be helpful if he remembered his wife’s name, his place of employment and his home address. If he was claiming to be attending a US university, it would be helpful also if he knew the name of the school, where it was located and perhaps what he was studying.

As part of Visa Express, consular officials were told to ignore the law and treat every Saudi as being presumptively entitled to a visa. This meant the visa application process was to be treated as a mere formality, with officers required not to challenge incomplete or evasive applications. Thus, if an applicant still failed to complete the form the consular officer was to treat the application as acceptable unless some clear warning flag arose, such as maybe shooting an embassy employee.

(Furey definitely thought Visa Express was a rousing success, for on June 26, 2001, twenty five days after implementation of Visa Express, he emailed Mary Ryan: “The number of people on the street and coming through the gates should be only 15 percent of what it was last summer. The RSO (Resident Security Officer) is happy, the public loves the service (no more long lines and they can go to the travel agencies in the evening and not take time off from work), we love it (no more crowd control stress and reduced work for the [embassy employees] and now this afternoon [we] discovered the most amazing thing—the Saudi Government loves it.”)⁷

⁵ Ibid. p.125

⁶ Ibid. pp. 127-8

⁷ Department of State email from Furey to Ryan, cited in Terrorist Travel Monograph Chapter 5, fn. 123

On September 11, 2001 the work done by Ryan, Harty and Furey resulted in the deaths of almost 3000 innocent people.

In June 2002, the State Department's own Office of Inspector General condemned the policies of Ryan, Harty and Furey. In its report entitled "Program Performance Report Fiscal Year 2001" the OIG stated: "Until the events of September 11, the visa process was seldom considered a major element of national security. This was so despite the fact that after the first attack on the World Trade Center [in 1993] Congress mandated" that visa applicants' names be run through various terrorist watch lists.⁸ In evaluating the Department's goals and the degree of success in attaining them the OIG report, concluded that in regard to "Countering Terrorism" the Department's performance was "*Unsuccessful, considering the events of September 11 that caused more than 3,000 deaths [sic] in well-planned attacks that evaded detection by United States and foreign security services. As to the Department's goal of "Identification of terrorist threats and prevention of terrorist attacks. Reduction in number, lethality of attacks. Evaluation: "Unsuccessful."*⁹

So how did the great man, the great judge of competence, Secretary of State Colin Powell respond to the mass murder that his Department had facilitated? Did he demand that Ryan, Harty and Furey resign?

On the contrary. He approved cash bonuses to both Ryan and Harty for "Outstanding Performance in 2001."

In the case of the chief culprit, Mary Ryan, Powell refused to respond to the public condemnation of her visa policies. He kept her on in charge of Consular Affairs, until late in 2002 when presented with the threat that Congress would transfer responsibility for granting visas to the soon to be created Department of Homeland Security. Only then, and only in order to avoid being the guy responsible for a historic rebuke to his Department did he get rid of her by forcing her retirement.

To replace her as head of Consular Affairs Powell, the Great Evaluator nominated Maura Harty. At her Senate hearings in October 2002 Harty, as if to confirm her monumental incompetence and contempt for those for whose murders she was partly responsible, she admitted that she had still not reviewed the applications of the 19 terrorists. Nevertheless, Powell stuck by her, and Congress, in a lame duck session after the November elections, confirmed her.¹⁰ In this job she continued to show the sort of incompetence which so impressed Mr. Powell: in mid-2007 at a Senate hearing she admitted guilt for a backlog of 2,000,000 passport applications.

Likewise did Powell refuse to acknowledge or punish Thomas Furey.

⁸ U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, Review of Nonimmigrant Visa Issuance Policy and Procedure, Memorandum Report ISP-I-03-26 December 2002.

⁹ UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE Program Performance Report Fiscal Year 2001 March 2002 U.S. Department of State Publication 10949, Washington D.C. (Released April 24, 2002) Available on the world wide web at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/9814.pdf>

¹⁰ 9/11 and Terrorist Travel p. 130

What could possibly have motivated the three Keystone Konsuls and their boss, Colin Powell, to ignore the law? What could have motivated them to ignore the clear and present danger that Arabs, Moslems, Saudis in particular, personified? There are several possibilities.

We know that the travel industry has a massive lobbying army in Washington which “educates” Congress, Presidential appointees and other bureaucrats in the State Department and DHS about the importance of allowing foreigners into the US with the fewest possible formalities. (That lobby recently succeeded in getting an expansion of the Visa Waiver Program from the former 27 eligible countries, to an unlimited number of nations. The result is that more aliens than ever before can visit our tall buildings without ever having to obtain a visa.). Of course, the more foreign tourists who visit, the more the industry can sell plane tickets, hotel rooms, rental cars and theme park tickets. Dead Americans are, to Marriott, Disney, American Airlines, et al., just a cost of doing business. For example, the 9/11 Commission described the plight of a US Customs Agent in Orlando who was reluctant to hold Saudis for secondary, more intense scrutiny, because he feared retribution from his superiors who in turn had been hammered by the Disney Company. The Disney Company did not want Saudis subjected to any obstacles, said the Commission because Saudis spent lots of money at Disneyworld.

Thus, it’s possible that Powell and company were simply dupes, but there is another, more sinister possibility. Some bureaucrats, after retiring from federal “service” in the State Department, military, Congress or as presidential appointees have gone on to lucrative careers working for entities controlled by Saudi interests or in lobbying firms which collect large fees from the Saudis. Human nature being what it is, it is inevitable that some officials, while involved in developing or implementing policy on Saudi Arabia, have been more concerned about getting highly paid post-retirement careers in Saudi controlled non-profits than in their obligation to protect the people of the United States. Colin Powell commands a speaker’s fee of over \$100,000 per performance; has Saudi money paid for any of this valuable advice after he left government service? (For more on the purchasing of former federal officials by foreign governments, see the essays of former FBI employee and whistleblower Sibel Edmonds at <http://nswbc.org/Op%20Ed/Part2-FNL-Nov29-06.htm>)

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