A new Powell doctrine: A preference for words over military force

by James M. Wall in the May 17, 2005 issue

In the film *The Interpreter*, Silvia Broome (Nicole Kidman) tells Secret Service agent Tobin Keller (Sean Penn) that she works as an interpreter at the United Nations because she prefers words to guns, even though she knows that words are "slower." Later in the film we see a photograph of a younger Silvia brandishing a gun; she had once been a rebel fighter in Africa.

This intelligent thriller by director Sydney Pollack is the first film ever made inside of the United Nations building. It offers a rare glimpse inside the structure that houses the General Assembly. By coincidence, the movie has arrived in theaters while the U.S. Senate is considering the nomination of former State Department official John Bolton as U.S. representative to the United Nations.

The film's release is a timely reminder of the importance of the UN, where world leaders—dictatorial as well as democratic—talk to one another in a multitude of languages that require interpreters like Silvia Broome. And they do so in an institution that would have to be created if it did not exist. A world without conversation between enemies, both current and potential, is a world courting disaster.

Yet the UN has been under steady fire from the Bush administration. Its choice of Bolton as the U.S. delegate to the UN has been viewed by UN supporters as an expression of disdain. Bolton has gone on record with several verbal attacks on the institution. Democratic senator Joe Biden told Bolton that he did not know why Bolton would even want the job—an ironic observation since it is clear that Bolton was named precisely because he is a fierce critic of the UN.

Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have opposed Bolton's nomination but have lacked the votes to block it. But three Republican senators have expressed reservations about the nomination, leading to postponement of the final vote. These reservations are inspired, in part, by conversations between former

secretary of state Colin Powell and two Republican senators, Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island and Chuck Hagel of Nebraska. According to the *New York Times's* Douglas Jehl, Powell "expressed concern about Mr. Bolton's temperament, credibility and treatment of intelligence analysts."

Powell's cautious intrusion into the hearings might not derail the Bolton nomination, but it has allowed Powell to signal his belief that the UN General Assembly deserves greater respect and support than it has been receiving from the world's remaining superpower. As a former army general, Powell has often spoken of his preference for words over military force. And, as the nation's secretary of state, he had his own recent and painful encounter at the UN when the words handed to him from faulty intelligence reports led him to justify the U.S. preemptive strike against Iraq.

That was certainly the low point in Powell's long and distinguished career as a soldier and diplomat. Since he left office, Powell has been discreet in his expressions of disappointment over that deception. Perhaps with the Bolton nomination Powell has decided he's seen enough of the Bush administration's UN bashing. Before his private conversations with the two Republican senators, Powell had chosen not to sign a letter endorsing Bolton that five other former Republican secretaries of state were submitting to the Senate committee.

Powell had at least indirectly signaled his disapproval of Bolton when he was still secretary of state. Apparently when a low-level intelligence officer told Bolton that a speech Bolton planned to give on Cuban biological threats was based on faulty intelligence, Bolton had verbally attacked him. According to testimony to the Senate committee, Bolton tried to have the officer removed from his assignment. After that encounter, which was well known throughout the State Department, Secretary Powell attended a staff meeting to thank employees for their work. While there, he offered a specific word of thanks to the staffer who has been upbraided by Bolton.

The world is a messy place and diplomacy is a delicate process. No one knows this better than Powell, who was born in New York City's Harlem, the son of Jamaican immigrants. Powell attended New York University and was enrolled as a geology major when he joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).

After graduating with an army commission, Powell went to Vietnam in 1963; he served two tours of duty, was wounded twice and received numerous medals, including the Legion of Merit. During a year in Washington as a White House fellow,

Powell met influential government officials and began a long career in both the army and the upper levels of Washington bureaucracy.

Whatever the outcome of the debate over the next UN representative from the U.S., and whatever the impact of Powell’s telephone calls to senators, Powell’s gestures offer an insight into this son of Jamaican immigrants who became both an army general and secretary of state. He knows that while words may work slowly, they are more effective and considerably cheaper than military force.