

# POWELL'S MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

A VETERAN STATE DEPARTMENT CORRESPONDENT GIVES A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT SECRETARY OF STATE POWELL'S RECENT ASIA TRIP.

BY GEORGE GEDDA

The scene was the Hotel Okura in Tokyo on the morning of Jan. 21. Todd Purdum of *The New York Times* approached Andrea Mitchell of NBC and asked whether she had gotten any sleep. "Two hours," Mitchell said. "Good," said Purdum, without irony.

Two hours of sleep may seem like a recipe for exhaustion but, for those accompanying Secretary of State Colin Powell on his five-nation Asia trip in January, it was not bad. As one who has traveled with nine secretaries of State dating from 1977, this was, for me, probably the most taxing of the 65 or so such trips. For two nights, there was no need for a hotel room; sleeping was a catch-as-catch-can affair aboard the secretary's plane.

Tokyo was the last stop of the six-day trip, dubbed by someone in the press as "the magical mystery tour." In Pakistan and India, Powell admonished both nations' leaders not to go to war over a Dec. 13 terrorist attack against the Indian Parliament, apparently perpetrated by anti-Indian militants based in Pakistan. In Nepal, Powell — the first secretary of State to visit the Himalayan mountain kingdom — voiced support for the government in its struggle against Maoist terrorists, while gently suggesting that good governance would make the Maoist option less appealing for young Nepalese. And in Japan, Powell attended an international conference designed to raise money for Afghanistan's reconstruction in the post-Taliban era.

The common thread of the trip was the war on terrorism,

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of course — the theme around which U.S. foreign policy has been organized since Sept. 11, much as the Cold War was during the latter half of the last century. Yet before the attacks, Powell had not given much thought to terrorism. During several hours of testimony before his Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing the previous January, the subject barely came up. So no one would have predicted that almost precisely a year later, he would be an honored guest in the presidential palace in Kabul, telling the country's new leader, "Afghanistan is emblazoned on the president's [Bush's] heart."

## Doing the Time Warp in Kabul

For most of the press, Afghanistan was the highlight of the trip. No secretary of State had visited there since 1976. There was an air of celebration during the Kabul visit, tempered by the realization that a mammoth reconstruction effort lay ahead. At one point, Powell called Afghanistan "a start-up country." It was an extraordinary day, with five takeoffs and landings — and, for some of us, only one meal.

Security obviously was a concern, and the press was asked to keep Powell's arrival there secret until he was safe on the ground in Kabul. Initially, a pre-dawn arrival was planned but that was later

changed to mid-morning. The night before the trip to Kabul, State Department staff handed notices to the media admonishing them to "use the bathroom" before departure. The unstated message: Don't expect to have the conveniences of home in Kabul.

We flew on a C-17 cargo plane from Islamabad to Bagram air base north of Kabul. We then switched to two Army Chinook helicopters for the flight to the capital. As we flew

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over barren hills and valleys, combat-ready troops were positioned at either side of the helicopters and at an open rear gate. Not surprisingly, Kabul Airport was rundown, symbolized by a sign atop a terminal building. It read: K\_BU\_. Presumably, some funds from the \$4.5 billion promised by donor countries in Tokyo over the next five years will be used to replace the missing "A" and "L." Or maybe Afghan officials will splurge and put up a fancy new sign worthy of what they hope will be a modern air traffic hub.

As for the city itself, many buildings were abandoned or were half-finished relics of never-completed construction projects. The low-slung adobe-like houses were substandard, to put it mildly. There was little street activity. Electricity was almost non-existent, as was phone service. To the extent that people were out and about, the great majority were male. There were few customers for shopkeepers who sat bundled up against the cold in front of their seen-better-days confines. Yet a U.S. diplomat assigned to one of the two press vans said this was the upscale part of town. Much of the rest of the city was rubble, dating from the early 1990s when Kabul was a battleground for factional fighting.

Powell's first stop was the presidential palace, where he met with Hamid Karzai, the first unabashedly pro-American leader Afghanistan has had in many years. Karzai, who heads a six-month interim government, was clearly a good choice for a country in desperate need of outside support. He speaks almost flawless English and when it comes to summoning anti-terrorism rhetoric, he's right up there with President Bush.

Powell then visited the U.S. embassy, where American soldiers were ubiquitous; some were manning gun emplacements on the roof. Kabul had been such a dangerous place that the embassy was shut down from 1989

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until just before Christmas last year. George P. Shultz was secretary of State when the mission was shuttered; his picture was still part of the decor in an embassy hallway. U.S. personnel used two bunkers behind the embassy as living quarters. The 50 or so staffers had but one shower to share among them.

After less than six hours, Powell left Kabul, taking rides aboard the same helicopter and cargo plane that he came in on. The cargo plane had jet fighter escorts on either side as it took off from Bagram for the flight to Islamabad, a little over an hour away. State Department correspondents have difficulty distinguishing between an F-16 and a B-52, so it fell to Powell himself to identify the escort aircraft. Peering out a window, he said, without hesitation: "F-14 Tomcats."

#### **Traveling With Colin**

For the news media, every trip with a secretary of State has ups and downs. The downs dominated on this trip but the more pleasant moments should not be overlooked. For starters, Powell is an engaging personality. He sometimes turns up in the back of the plane for small talk with the press. On this trip, without much prompting, he

burst into song and talked about his favorite recording artists (a Jamaican and a Trinidadian).

Having achieved extraordinary heights in his military career, Powell behaves as though he doesn't have anything to prove. He shuns fancy introductions prior to news conferences and seems to think that time spent shaking hands could be spent doing something more productive. On trips, shopping is not a priority. To the extent possible, he likes to stick to his schedule.

Like most of his predecessors, he rarely betrays anger, but does show annoyance from time to time. For example, on our way back to the States, I asked him whether the administration's \$296 million Afghanistan first-year reconstruction pledge, announced in Tokyo, was generous enough. After all, that figure was comparable to the cost of the new football stadium being built in the Boston area and about a third of fees charged by the Peter Angelos law firm to the state of Maryland for litigation against tobacco companies. He responded by saying that well before the donors' conference, the administration had already spent billions on the military effort in Afghanistan and \$400 million on humanitarian assistance.

As Powell returned to Washington after the stop in Japan, polls showed American interest in terrorism on the wane. But barely a week afterward, Bush made clear in his State of the Union address that the terrorism threat was still serious despite the successes in Afghanistan.

Terrorists, Bush said, "view the entire world as a battlefield, and we must pursue them wherever they are ... I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer." For Powell and other members of the national security team, the message was clear: the terrorism challenge will remain at the top of the agenda for as far the eye can see. ■