

“Mr Powell must see for himself what Israel inflicted on Jenin,”

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The credibility of US policy on the conflict has been shattered

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Why doesn't Colin Powell go to Jenin? What has happened to the world's moral compass – indeed to the United States – when America's most famous ex-general, the Secretary of State of the most powerful country on earth, on a supposedly desperate mission to stop the bloodshed in the Middle East, fails to grasp what is taking place in front of his nose? The stench of decaying corpses is wafting out of the Palestinian city. The Israeli army is still keeping the Red Cross and journalists from seeing the evidence of the mass killings that have taken place there. “Hundreds” – on Israel's own admission – have died, including civilians. Why, for God's sake, can't Mr Powell do the decent thing and demand an explanation for the extraordinary, sinister events that have taken place in Jenin?

Instead, after joshing with Ariel Sharon after his arrival in Jerusalem on Friday, Mr Powell is playing games, demanding that Yasser Arafat condemn Friday's bloody suicide bombing in Jerusalem (total, six dead and 65 wounded) while failing to utter more than a word of “concern” for the infinitely more terrible death toll in Jenin. Is Mr Powell frightened of the Israelis? Does he really have to debase himself in this way? Does he think that meeting Arafat, or refusing to do so, takes precedence over the enormous humanitarian tragedy and slaughter that has overwhelmed the Palestinians? Is President Bush – whose demand that Ariel Sharon withdraw his troops from the West Bank has been blandly ignored – so gutless, so cynical, as to allow this charade to continue? For this is the endgame, the very final proof that the United States is no longer morally worthy of being a Middle East peacemaker.

Even for one who has witnessed so much duplicity in the Middle East, it is a shock to reflect on the events of the past nine days. Let's just remember, as the Americans would say, “the facts”. Almost two weeks ago, the United Nations Security Council, with the active participation and support of the United States, demanded an immediate end to Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza. President Bush insisted that Mr Sharon should follow the advice of “Israel's American friends” and – because our own Mr Blair was with the President at the time – of “Israel's British friends”, and withdraw. “When I say withdraw, I mean it,” Mr Bush snapped three days later. But of course, it's now clear that he meant nothing of the kind.

Instead, he sent Mr Powell off on his “urgent” mission of peace, a journey to Israel and the West Bank that would take the Secretary of State an incredible eight days – just enough time, Mr Bush presumably thought, to allow his “good friend” Mr Sharon to finish his latest bloody adventure in the West Bank. Supposedly unaware that Israel's chief of staff, Shoal Mofaz, had told Mr Sharon that he needed at least eight weeks to “finish the job” of crushing the Palestinians, Mr Powell wandered off around the Mediterranean, dawdling in Morocco, Spain, Egypt and Jordan before finally washing up in Israel on Friday morning. If Washington firefighters took that long to reach a blaze, the American capital would

long ago have turned to ashes. But of course, the purpose of Mr Powell's idleness was to allow enough time for Jenin to be turned to ashes. Mission, I suppose, accomplished.

As Israel's indisciplined soldiery yesterday continued to hide their deeds from the outside world by preventing the Red Cross, aid workers, ambulances and journalists from entering the rubble of Jenin, Mr Powell was sitting idly by in Israel, calling for the "utmost restraint" from an army that has not yet finished filling the mass graves of Jenin. That he should see a visit to Yasser Arafat – the grotesque, corrupt old man of Ramallah – as the make-or-break issue of his "peacemaking" shows just how skewed Mr Powell's morality has become. Mr Arafat's advisers (let's not give any credit to the would-be "martyr-chairman" of the Palestinian Authority for this) shrewdly announced that it is for Mr Powell to condemn the killings in Jenin, for Mr Arafat could be expected to condemn the vicious suicide bombing in Jerusalem on Friday. And even though Mr Arafat mouthed the relevant words of contrition and condemnation yesterday afternoon, it makes little difference.

All last week, while Mr Sharon's soldiers were running amok in Jenin, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer was playing the role of Mr Sharon's point man in Washington. When Israel announced that its army was pulling out of three tiny West Bank villages – so tiny that no one had ever heard of them before – Mr Fleischer announced that this was "a step in the right direction". Then by Friday morning, when even the most dimwitted observer had grasped that something was terribly wrong in Jenin, Mr Fleischer was telling us that Sharon was "a man of peace". How much longer, one wonders, could this nonsense continue?

Of course, the Palestinians – or whoever directs the sepulchral, nightmarish campaign of suicide bombing, for it surely cannot be the preposterous Mr Arafat – are going for the jugular. The Al Aqsa Brigades or Hamas or Islamic Jihad clearly intend to ensure that Mr Sharon's ruthless operation fails (the Israeli reoccupation, after all, was supposed to be preventing these wicked Palestinian crimes) and to ensure that Mr Powell is made to look impotent. They seem certain to accomplish both goals. The Palestinian Authority, to all intents and purposes, has for now ceased to exist. That was surely one of Mr Sharon's intentions. And Mr Powell's weakness, his failure of nerve, his cowardice, are now likely to set off an Israeli-Palestinian war even more terrible than what we have witnessed so far.

But let's pause for a quick journey down memory lane; to September 1982, when Ariel Sharon was "rooting out the network of terror" in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in Beirut. Before sending Israel's murderous Phalangist militia allies into the camps, Mr Sharon told the world that the Palestinians had assassinated the Phalangist leader, Bashir Gemayel. This was totally untrue, but the Phalange believed him. And evidence is now emerging in Beirut that, long after the Americans had called for Israel to withdraw the killers from the camp, the Israeli army, commanded by then Defence Minister Sharon, handed more than 1,000 survivors over to those same murderers to be slaughtered over the following two weeks. This, primarily, is why Mr Sharon is so worried by the attempts to indict him for war crimes in Brussels.

Hasn't Mr Powell glanced through the State Department archives for 1982? Hasn't he read what Mr Sharon said back then, the same ranting about "terror networks" and "rooting out terror" that he

employs today? A lexicon which Mr Powell himself is now enthusiastically using? Has he forgotten that the Israeli Kahan commission held Mr Sharon “personally responsible” for the massacre of those 1,700 civilians? Does Mr Powell really think that Jenin, albeit on a smaller scale, is much different? Even if we dismiss all the Palestinian claims of civilian butchery, extrajudicial executions and the wholesale destruction of thousands of homes, what on earth does he think the Israelis are hiding in Jenin? Why doesn't he go and look?

Yes, the Palestinians' suicide campaign is immoral, unforgivable, insupportable. One day, the Arabs – never ones to look in the mirror when it comes to their own crimes – will have to acknowledge the sheer cruelty of their tactics. They have not done this so far. But since the Israelis never attempted to confront the immorality of shooting to death child stone-throwers in the early days of the intifada or the evil of their reckless death squads who went around murdering Palestinians on their wanted list, along with the usual clutch of women and kids who got in the way, is this any wonder?

In the annals of war, the conflict in the Middle East has reached a new apogee, but the story of the United States' involvement in the Middle East will never be the same again. Thanks to Mr Powell, President Bush and Mr Sharon, America's credibility has been shattered. Israel, it turns out, does indeed run US policy in the region. The Secretary of State sings from the Israeli songbook. So when, oh when, will the Europeans screw their courage to the sticking-place and become the peacemakers of the Middle East?