

## **“Internalizing the Arguments”**

**Interviewee:** Colin Powell

**Interviewer:** Robert A. Strong

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As chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell was part of an experienced team advising President George H. W. Bush. Powell discusses Bush’s decision-making style and the team’s dynamics in debating the issues.

**Strong:** That pause, as it’s called, that takes place in the first six to nine months of the administration when they are trying to work out: What are we going to do with [Mikhail] Gorbachev? What’s happening in the big picture? Did that do any harm? Did we miss opportunities? Or, were we fortunate that during that period lots of good things were happening in Eastern Europe? Lots of risks that Gorbachev might have had, he finessed and got around. Should we be very critical of the President [George H. W. Bush] or his team for taking so long to reach their decision on the Soviet Union, or was it okay?

**Colin Powell:** No, I don’t think you should be critical of the President and his team. Every new President and team don’t want to just follow in the mold of those who went before, even if they are of their own party, and if it’s another party, then it’s even more dramatic. President Bush is a cautious individual. I think he did see the big picture, but he really wanted to make sure he understood it fully.

One of the things I remember most vividly about the President is that when we had an issue to deal with, or we were debating something, or there was a little problem in front of us, he was always very thoughtful in thinking about it. I don’t know if I wrote it in the book or not, but he would let us argue in front of him. We were all old friends. We had all worked with each other in different capacities, so we knew each other. This was a gang of professional killer angels. We all knew each other, we knew what each one of us thought, we knew our strengths and weaknesses, and Bush would let us argue in front of him.

I’ve even told the story that if I disagreed with Mr. [Richard B. “Dick”] Cheney about something, Dick would present the Defense Department position. “This is what the Defense Department thinks.” Then he would say, “But Colin doesn’t agree with everything. Colin, tell the President what you don’t like.” That was very professional and mature. The President would listen carefully, not necessarily taking a long time, but he would listen

carefully, [snaps fingers] and then he'd be very decisive. I really liked that, because he wanted to hear all the arguments and he was internalizing it slowly, kind of chewing his lower lip a little bit and just sitting there with a slight tilt forward as he absorbed all of this. Only after we had finished beating up each other and disagreeing with one another would he start to ask questions.

*End of excerpt.*

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