

The strategist | For 14 years, SU professor Bill Smullen was Colin Powell's chief of staff. He always had a plan

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For Col. Bill Smullen, the Gulf War started with a phone call on Jan. 17, 1991.

Smullen was in his Pentagon office when Gen. Colin Powell, his boss and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked Smullen to come down and watch what they'd spent six months planning for: Operation Desert Storm.

The two men stood around Powell's television watching CNN reporters broadcast live from Baghdad.

"So we watched the air attack with explosions all over the city," said Smullen, then-Powell's chief of staff. "But that was our best intelligence gathering possible, to get it live courtesy of CNN. It's not like we had soldiers on the ground in Baghdad; we were still in Kuwait."

That January morning, Operation Desert Storm began with American airstrikes. The conflict would last until Feb. 28 when President George H.W. Bush declared a cease-fire, and troops liberated Kuwait.

As chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Powell was the Bush administration's chief military adviser and the Pentagon's highest-ranking officer. For Powell's four-year term as chairman, Smullen was Powell's top aide, controlling the information released by his office. He also managed Powell's personal brand, a job he did so well he frequently ended up working to make sure Powell's reputation didn't surpass that of Bush or then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney.

In 1993, both Powell and Smullen retired from the U.S. army. Following their retirement, Smullen continued his role as Chief of Staff. Later in 2003, Smullen finally left Powell, then-Secretary of State, to work at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.

Then and now, Smullen is the type of man who is meticulously organized. The type of man who always has a plan.

"I believe you must have a plan in your professional and private life," said Smullen, 68. "If you don't have a plan, then you're going to fail."

At the Pentagon, Smullen and Powell encountered 27 crises. Smullen labelled each as small, medium or large. The Gulf War, labelled large, was the crisis they laboured over most. Part of the plan to win the Gulf War hinged on keeping the American people up to date. This part of the plan also happened to be Smullen's job.

"Information dissemination was critical to our purpose. And I devoted every waking moment to that," Smullen said. "Harkening back to the Vietnam War, we lost the public confidence partially because we didn't inform the public of what we were doing or why we were doing it. We learned then that you cannot maintain public approval unless you keep the public informed."

During those 43 days of the Gulf War, Smullen helped orchestrate 38 press conferences. And his information campaign began on the war's first day. As soon as Smullen and Powell finished watching the televised airstrikes on Jan. 17, Powell gave press conference No. 1: explaining what people had watched unfold on CNN.

"The other 36 days, I prepared two other gentlemen, a three-star general and a one-star admiral, to do the press conferences for the Joint Staff," Smullen said.

Admiral Gregory Johnson worked at the Pentagon during the Gulf War. He served on a crisis action team and worked, as everyone at the Pentagon did, long, 14-hour days.

"As you would expect, as any time when we're involved with war, it's quite a grind," Johnson said.

Shortly after the war, Johnson joined Powell's staff as his executive assistant. Johnson, Smullen and Powell "basically lived together professionally," Johnson said, until Powell retired in 1993.

Smullen had a gift for analyzing a situation, Johnson said. "Col. Smullen was always on his game. I don't think he ever gave Gen. Powell bad advice or suggested an option that wasn't the best option," he said.

Smullen was especially talented at looking to the future, Johnson said.

"He was a great anticipator, looking over the horizon at what's coming next and what we need to do to prepare for that and connecting the dots," Johnson said.

When Powell retired in 1993, Smullen found himself as the sole manager of

Powell's personal brand - a brand that was becoming increasingly popular.

"As a matter of fact," Smullen said, "we used to kiddingly say that we had to be very careful that he didn't overshadow Mother Teresa."

Talk swirled that Powell might run for president in the 1996 election. In the end, Powell announced in late 1995 he wouldn't run. Ironically, both Powell and Smullen thought they wouldn't have enough planning time to create a successful campaign and thought Powell's popularity would die out.

"We thought we could turn the lights out," Smullen said. "But contrary to anticipation, his popularity went up instead of down. More people wanted him to stay in the public light. So he did."

Following the 1996 election, Powell set up a non-profit organization, America's Promise Alliance, which would work to help at-risk youth. After a Pittsburgh summit that drew attention to the company, Powell turned to Smullen for advice.

"I'll never forget him coming into the office and saying, 'OK, Smullen, what do we do now?'" Smullen said. "There was no model; there was nothing that we could replicate."

The plan went something like this, Smullen recalls: they had to find money, find a place to house the organization and hire a staff. "We had to do an awful lot of scrambling to get this thing moving before it died out or people lost interest."

The money came from a wealthy philanthropist, Raymond Chambers, who donated \$5 million. They set up on the fourth floor in the Armed Forces Benefit Association's building in Alexandria, Va., where Powell and Smullen kept their private offices on the seventh floor.

As for the staff, Smullen hired Joanne Giordano to be America's Promise's head of communication and one of the people in charge of creating connections with potential donors and broadcasting the organization's message.

For Giordano, Smullen was the man who solved problems.

"Bill Smullen is the type of man you want to be in the foxhole with," Giordano said.

Smullen came to SU in 2003. And he's still the same detail-oriented person and strategic thinker. The man who tries to park in the same spot each morning. The man who keeps a reporter's notebook full of the telephone calls he makes and receives. The man who had to go to the Carrier Dome to pick out his season tickets by sitting in the seats instead of just going to the box office.

At Maxwell, he heads the National Security Studies Program, a two-week course that features guest speakers and lecturers for professionals already in the field. Smullen and the speakers try to get the professionals to start thinking about what will come next.

"And I tell them this the very first day: My job is to help you think more strategically about your jobs, about your work, about your lives," Smullen said. "And what I want you to begin to think about doing is to, as often as you can, look beyond the horizon."

While he doesn't interact with students at Maxwell, he's very hands on with his public relations students at Newhouse, said John Marshall, a third-year student in the College of Law, who took Smullen's PRL 725: Public Relations Management course.

"What he taught was if you were actually working in public affairs and something came across your desk, what would you do? How would you handle the situation?" Marshall said. "So it's really a management course through hands-on training experience."

In the class, Smullen stressed the idea of rehearsal and the importance of thinking ahead, Marshall said. "He was more concerned with, 'How can you tackle the problems that you have not yet anticipated?' I think his solution to that would be to prepare in every way that you know how."

For Smullen, it has always been about the plan. For 14 years he helped Colin Powell, a man who almost ran for president, navigate Washington, D.C. And now at SU, he teaches the importance of what he learned: strategy and a plan are key to solving any crisis or problem.

"Quite frankly, most of us are so busy that we don't have the time to think about what happens next. And I just don't think we can afford to be at that speed and at that level," Smullen said. "Getting the job is not sufficient enough. It's getting the job done, plus getting done whatever you need to do to prepare for the future."