

Powell and Khan: Two Stories about the United States, Iraq, and the 2008 Election

Dr. Moustafa Bayoumi
Brooklyn College, City University of New York
bayoumi@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Sixteen days before the 2008 United States election, former Secretary of State Colin Powell, breaking with his own Republican Party, backed Barack Obama for president. In his eloquent endorsement, Powell spoke powerfully against the rising racism of the Republican Party and movingly about the death of Kareem Khan, a twenty-year old Army Specialist who died in Iraq. Powell said he had been thinking about Kareem Khan after seeing a photograph in the *New Yorker* magazine of Khan's mother grieving at her son's gravestone, which was marked by a crescent and star, leading Powell to wonder: "Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim American kid believing that he or she could be President?" He continued: "Yet, I have heard senior members of my own Party drop the suggestion that [Obama's] Muslim and he might be associated with terrorists. This is not the way we should be doing it in America."

Powell's endorsement was both a significant moment in the election and a revealing marker of many different forces in contemporary American politics as they came crashing together. These forces include domestic race relations, religion and anti-Islamic feelings, overseas war, personal sacrifice, ethnic scapegoating, myths of opportunity, and the realities of American expansionism. As the United States becomes more directly involved, especially militarily, in the Middle East, its relationship to its own Muslims, Arabs, and greater sense of self will also necessarily change. What will the impact of that change be on the Middle East and on the United States? Through telling two stories—one, the public story of the election and its anti-Muslim foundations, and the other the story of Kareem Khan, gathered through interview with his family and friends—this presentation will examine these issues in greater depth and venture some tentative answers.