A Fable

Halstead Harrison
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"Secretary of State Colin L. Powell will depart today on a quick visit to Turkey to mend frayed ties with the NATO ally and urge it to not send troops into neighboring Iraq. He also is to meet with European officials in Belgium on Thursday before returning home."

Washington Post, April 1, 2003

No. This is not another April 1st story. He's on the plane as I write this, and I find myself wondering about his agenda: to patch up recent diplomatic disasters, certainly, but how?

The clue, I think, is his "meeting with European officials in Belgium". Relations are so foul between us and the governments of France and Germany that direct contact between high animals is just not on. But diplomacy works through back doors, and there's a certain contrition when a country's highest diplomat comes hat in hand. That is what is happening now, I think. Here is how the conversation might go:

General Powell: Mr. Ambassador, it is good of you to see me, on such short notice.

French Ambassador: Not at all, Sir. How may I help you?"

Powell: As you may surmise, your Excellency, I'm here to mend some fences. Specifically, I'm directed by my President to explore cooperation with your government in the reconstruction of Iraq, after hostilities end there.

French Ambassador: And what does your president have in mind, Sir?
Powell: As you can imagine, the task is going to be both expensive and lengthy. And as you know, fiscal matters in the US are both tight and touchy. Speaking of the matter baldly, Sir, we suggest that your country might wish to share in the costs, as well as in the obvious benefits of the project, and that 10 B$ would seem a reasonable earnest of good will.

French Ambassador: [Long pause, then ..]

America is truly a great country, powerful, diverse, and yes .. even cultured. Did you know that your interesting magazine, "Readers Digest", is widely studied among my colleagues here?

I remember an amusing tale recounted there, of your football, told by the quarterback of a small college team noted for losing by the most lopsided of scores. It was two hundred something to zero, a record I believe, and the losing quarterback was remarkable in speaking of it so freely. I recall him telling the story something like this:

"We knew we were in for a beating, but there was money in it for new uniforms, and our Coach's job depended on it, and it wasn't exactly that we could just duck out of the game.

Those guys from Georgia Tech weighed about 220 pounds each, when that wasn't so common then as now, and we tipped maybe 180 or so .. I forget exactly. They trotted out onto the field like beer-cart horses in blood red jerseys. Ours started out white, sort of, but by the third quarter you couldn't tell the difference, from bloody noses and all.

Of course, we didn't get our hands on the ball all that much, except after kickoff. And not that we could keep it for a couple of plays before punting it away. And not that we could punt it off at all, half the time, with them blocking it on our five-yard line or so.
But once by some miracle we were up all the way to our thirty, first and ten, and I dropped back a bit to find a receiver open [what was I dreaming, I wonder?], and a big Georgia guard came up behind me and popped the ball out of my hand. [That was nice of him, really, they were beginning to pity us.]

Well, Sir, that ball fell in front of our halfback, and I yelled to him "Billy-Joe! Fall on it!", and he yelled back "Fall on it yourself, you son of a bitch! You're the one who dropped it!"

And that, Mr. Secretary, is the message that my President has instructed me to convey to yours.

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