

A Lifetime of Exceptional Service

From Soldier to Scholar



Coming full circle: Bill Smullen's journey returned him to Orono after a nearly 50-year career spanning war, peace and collaboration with Colin Powell.

By Jim Frick

Thirty years as an Army officer, including ten at the Pentagon and a stint at the State Department, gave Bill Smullen '62 a deep understanding of national security issues. Today, as director of National Security Studies at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University Graduate School, he feels a responsibility to tap that understanding in an effort to raise awareness about the difficult challenges that lie ahead.

On October 6, Smullen brought his message to his alma mater, the University of Maine. His talk, "A Decade of Crisis and Correction," reflected on the lessons of the first 10 years of the new millennium.

"I'm an admirer of Winston Churchill," Smullen said. "Churchill believed, 'To look backward is to see forward.' Right now we need to look back in time and learn from history so that we don't repeat mistakes."

Negative impact on U.S. reputation

Many of those mistakes, Smullen believes,

have led to diminished respect and admiration for America on the world stage.

"When the USSR disintegrated, we became the lone superpower," he explained. "I'm not sure we grasped our new responsibility when that happened. As things evolved in our new role, we quite frankly made decisions that weren't helpful in terms of how we were viewed by the rest of the world."

Among those poor decisions, Smullen believes, was the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

"Our 'brand' has been in decline since the invasion of Iraq in 2003," he noted. "We've suffered decreasing favorability ratings around the world—even with our allies."

Today's national security challenges—including declining resources, climate change, pandemics, and market fluctuations—can't be resolved militarily, he explained. They beg for international cooperation. The U.S. can't fix these complex problems alone, Smullen concluded. It needs to "lead by example."

Influence of Vietnam experience

Leading by example is something Bill Smullen has done throughout his distinguished career.

Following graduation from UMaine (where he majored in business and economics) he went directly into the Army



as a 2nd Lieutenant. His first tour of duty was Korea. It was there that he first considered a career in the military.

"It was soldiering 24 hours a day," he said, "and it's what led me to fall in love with the Army. I knew I wanted more of the military and the experiences it provided."

As a young officer in Vietnam, Smullen got a full dose. His first tour in 1966 was as an advisor for South Vietnamese troops, working in a remote area in the central part of the country.

"It was pretty isolated," Smullen remembered. "Our advisory team of eight men didn't get rations or supplies like regular Army units. We practically lived off the land."

Smullen's second Vietnam tour came in 1971, this time serving with an American unit. This experience was far different from the first and he returned home with a feeling of disappointment.

"I went to Vietnam thinking I would be part of a successful effort," he said. "But we weren't successful. It didn't leave me with

a good feeling."

But the Vietnam experience did give Smullen a greater appreciation of things he had once taken for granted, including life itself.

"Your sense of mortality changes," he noted. "You no longer take for granted that



you are going to be around forever. You realize how important family and friends are." Smullen added that his war experiences helped him grow as a leader.

"You have to take a lot of initiative and accept a lot of responsibility," he said. "In a war there's not always someone there telling you how to handle a situation."

Transition from war to PR professional

After Vietnam, Smullen asked the Army if it would send him back to school. He earned a master's degree in public communications from Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and soon after became chief of media relations at the U.S. Military Academy. It proved to be an eventful and interesting three years of service at West Point. Smullen described it as "a real baptism under fire in public relations."

The year was 1975 and President Gerald Ford had just signed the bill admitting women to the U.S. service academies.

"That created a real cultural change at

West Point," he recalled. "We needed to put together an aggressive and effective media campaign to handle the challenge of recruiting women. I had to apply all the skills and lessons I learned at Syracuse immediately."

The admittance of women wasn't the only controversial situation Smullen had to deal with at West Point. The academy also underwent the biggest academic scandal in its history when some 200 cadets were found to have cheated on an electrical engineering exam. As the scandal unfolded, Smullen came to work every day to find reporters from New York's major newspapers waiting outside his office.

"It was a difficult situation, but I learned and grew from it," he reflected.

Smullen moved on from West Point and after a stint at Fort Carson, Colorado, and in Panama, he received the appointment he had long dreaded—duty at the Pentagon.

"I didn't want it," he recalled, "but I was told I owed it to the Army."

That was 1983. Smullen was a Lieutenant Colonel assigned to help create a new branch of public affairs, advising Pentagon senior leaders in media matters. After nine months, he was asked to take over the position of chief of media relations—the senior spokesman for the entire Army.

Teaming up with Colin Powell

Smullen was at the Pentagon for 10 years and achieved the rank of full Colonel. He served, as his final assignment, as special assistant to two Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Crowe and General Colin Powell. And when Powell retired in 1993, Smullen—after 30 years of service—retired with him.

But it was far from the end of their working relationship.

"He [Powell] asked me beforehand if I would help him write his book and run his private office," Smullen recalled. "I agreed and remained in that role until the General took over the State Department in 2001, as Secretary."

The retired officers spent two years working on Powell's book.

"I did the research and a bit of the writing," Smullen explains. "The publisher, Random House was expecting big things and scheduled a five week book-signing tour in the U.S. and Europe—the most ambitious they had ever put together."

Those grueling five weeks really sealed the bond between Powell and Smullen. And the tour paid dividends. *My American Journey* became an instant bestseller.

During those years in private life, the two men also collaborated to create Powell's America's Promise Alliance, an organization that brings caring adults together with at-risk youth.

"That was probably the greatest challenge of my life," Smullen said. "How do you grow an organization like that? There was no blueprint. No funding. No staff. It was a daunting undertaking. But we did it, and it is still going strong today. That experience brought me a great deal of satisfaction."

The bond and trust between Smullen and Powell continued to grow. In 2001,

President George W. Bush appointed Colin Powell Secretary of State. Powell brought Smullen in as his chief of staff, responsible for monitoring and evaluating departmental policies and developing strategies on foreign policy matters. Smullen left the State Department in 2002 for academia. Although his tenure as chief of staff was short, it was eventful. He served with Powell at the State Department through the 9/11 terrorist attack and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan.

New role at Syracuse

The call to academia came from Syracuse University. Smullen was invited to become the director of its National Security Studies Program at its Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and faculty member in its S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications.

"When I was working on my master's, I remember walking around the Syracuse campus and speculating on how great it

would be to be a college professor someday—never really thinking that I'd actually get the opportunity," he remembers.

That early dream is now realized—and enriched by all that has intervened. At the Maxwell School, Smullen applies his experience and insight to prepare senior military and civilian leaders for national security challenges unimagined even a decade ago.

The world and America's role in it have changed dramatically since Bill Smullen left UMaine in 1962 to serve his country as a newly commissioned officer. His role, too, has evolved in those five decades—from soldier to scholar. The young Vietnam veteran Captain who once prepared green troops for combat now helps prepare leaders to deal with subtle complexities of 21st century national security. One thing has remained unchanged in all those years: Smullen's commitment to service—service toward making America safer and more secure. 🐾

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- **Lobster & Clam Bake for 8** on Holbrook Pond, Holden, ME, Dick Gasset '61, '64G
- **"Adiron-deck" Chair**, hand made by Kurt Marston '74, '79G
- **Lego building block table & storage** from crafter CK Norton Services
- **Week cottage rental in East Blue Hill**, Dick '65 and Tina Abbott McNeary '66
- Lots more crafts, memorabilia, apparel and gift certificates

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