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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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From: Rhodes, Benjamin J. [mailto:]
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To: Mills, Cheryl D; Sullivan, Jacob J; McDonough, Denis R. []; Reines, Philippe I;
NSC Deputy Press Secretary
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Why P.J. Crowley went rogue

By: Ben Smith
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To friends, colleagues and even critics, there are few more unlikely candidates than P.J. Crowley to become a free speech martyr and a darling of the left. A veteran of three decades in the Air Force public affairs division, Crowley was a notoriously tight-lipped spokesman for the National Security Council during the Clinton administration and has been viewed for most his career as a guy who, above all, hates to make news.

How to square that, then, with the Crowley who lost his job as assistant Secretary of State last month by characterizing Wikileaks suspect Bradley Manning's treatment by the Pentagon as "ridiculous, counterproductive and stupid"? The Crowley who was given a chance by take those words back by Philippa Thomas, a BBC reporter on leave as a Nieman fellow at Harvard University, but answered, after a brief pause, when Thomas asked if was speaking on the record: "Sure."

When Thomas reported Crowley's statement, some of his friends thought he'd acted on the flack's equivalent of a Freudian death wish, spontaneously combusting in the lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His critics in government, who'd long regarded him as too aggressive, even undisciplined, to speak from the State Department podium, viewed the statement as his latest gaffe.

To Crowley, it was neither. It was just the latest step in his characteristically low-key decision to go a just a little bit rogue, the latest step in a career spokesman's realization that words can have real power.

"When I paused and then agreed to have the remark on the record, I knew there was a dart that I was sending to the Pentagon," he said in a recent interview in the deserted bar of a Washington hotel

Crowley didn't know for sure he would lose his job the next day, he recalled, but he did realize what he'd done.

"I knew it would get attention," he said.

And it did. Crowley might have kept his job, or at least found a softer landing, had President Obama not been asked about his comment 18 hours later at a news conference and voiced full support of the Pentagon.

"When I understood that both the question had been posed to the President and he answered it the way he did, and then there was ... what the White House staff thought of the situation," he said. "I knew I had lost their trust and confidence and in that circumstance I knew that I had to resign."

Washington, D.C. is full of people one sentence, one tweet, one false – that is, true – word away from ending their careers. A sarcastic comment about the boss, a passionate statement on policy, or an insensitive status update – all can be fatal to everyone from a member of Congress to a junior staffer at a public relations firm.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton brought Crowley, 59, to the State Department in part because he was viewed as someone who was virtually certain to make none of those mistakes. Crowley had always seemed the soul of discretion, a spokesman so wedded to the daily guidance during the Clinton White House years that reporters joked that he might go on background if asked what the next day's weather forecast looked like.

But unbeknown to his new colleagues at State - and many of his old friends across Washington - Crowley arrived at State after an evolution of sorts. The career Air Force officer, who had entered a military establishment still scarred by the Vietnam War and still deeply hostile to the press, spent his years in civilian life at the Center for American Progress, thinking about strategy. There, some colleagues were surprised to find that his politics seemed to have been shaped more, as one put it, by his native Massachusetts than the Air Force. He settled on the idea of "strategic narrative," a concept that has made its way into national security jargon from business theory, and one he included in a report he wrote for CAP.

At the State Department podium, Crowley seemed to find his voice and to also realize that his voice could shape policy. "In the digital global age that we're in, our actions and our words have greater impact. I knew that at the podium – that I would say something and within a few hours, the message would be received somewhere else – and a response," he said. "That has impact, because on a regular basis, at the podium, I would challenge the impact of other countries on the treatment of their own citizens, their treatment of prisoners, on their treatment of the media."

And Crowley – to the occasional dismay of some of his colleagues at State and the White House – had come to view himself as having a special public role.

"There were times when I thought it was important to push for the United States to take a public stand," he said of his time at the podium. "I thought it was important to make sure that what we were saying and what we were doing would be consistent with, not only our interest but our values."

Behind the scenes at the State Department, he'd often argued for blunter, less diplomatic talk. And he'd at times angered the White House and his colleagues by straying dramatically from his official guidance, and positioning himself not just as a staid briefer but as a combatant on the global stage.

"The Egyptian government can't reshuffle the deck and then stand pat," he warned in one late January tweet that had not, officials said, been approved by the White House staffers trying to manage the chaos of President Hosni Mubarak's last days.

In an earlier instance, when Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi called for a Jihad against Switzerland last year, Crowley responded by mocking his lengthy speech at the United Nations.

"Lots of words and lots of papers flying all over the place, not necessarily a lot of sense," he said.

Qadhafi was, at the time, still a sometime partner of the United States, and Libyan diplomats – and Crowley's own colleagues – were livid. He was forced to apologize.

"These comments do not reflect US policy and were not intended to offend," he said at time. But in his interview last week with POLITICO, he was less repentant. "I was not wrong. Maybe I wasn't diplomatic, but I was not wrong," Crowley said.

Even on the morning of his Manning remarks, Crowley had tweeted – and then deleted – a comparison of the Japanese tsunami to the metaphorical "tsunami" sweeping the Middle East and North Africa. He said he now regrets only deleting it, which he did because "my staff thought that that was insensitive."

To the Obama Administration's careful national security team, these and other Crowley comments were sloppy and infuriating. To Crowley, it was deliberate strategy in a job that has, as he sees it, an institutional role beyond the demands of day-to-day politics.

"I view myself as a strategic thinker and always tried to put what I was saying at the podium in a broader context and trying to always assess, will my words be credible?" he said.

Crowley has stood by his blunt criticism of the Defense Department's treatment of Manning, but it was the last straw, and the anger from the Pentagon and the White House ensured his immediate departure.

And the State Department quietly put out word that he was on his way out with nothing to lose, being pushed aside in favor of his deputy, Mike Hammer.

Neither of those claims is quite true. Crowley was indeed exhausted by his job and had critics in the White House and rivals in Clinton's inner circle. But he'd been offered the softest of landings, an ambassadorship, two senior Democrats said, a post the Manning comments cost him.

And Crowley has no obvious successor in a post that has served as the latest illustration of the quiet personnel wars that have long plagued Secretary Clinton. Crowley's tense relationship with her longtime aide and former Senate spokesman, Philippe Reines,

proved so problematic that hints of it made it into a draft inspector general's report that also criticized Crowley's management. But the Assistant Secretary had been filling three roles: He was the Assistant Secretary, but Clinton had failed to hire a Principal Deputy for management after her first choice, Mary Ellen Glynn, fell through. Clinton had also been looking for another spokesman to brief reporters daily, and Crowley had suggested former Clinton White House and current State Department official Jonathan Prince, but no one was ever hired to fill the post. State Department officials suggested when Crowley departed that Hammer would permanently fill the post; now, two officials said, it appears that he won't.

Some observers also believed, after Crowley's explosive exit, that he had made a clever career move, positioning himself to leave government for a position as a hero of the left. The anti-war group Code Pink even protested outside the State Department.

But Crowley himself turns a bit pink at the memory of that protest, leaning in and folding his hands between his thighs out of evident embarrassment. Though he's made irregular television appearances, he hasn't become a leader of the campaign to free Manning, whom he thinks "should spend a long long time in jail," though his pre-trial treatment was undermining perceptions of the American legal system.

Crowley, for his part, plans to begin teaching, he said.

"I'm not a larger than life person," he said. "I'm short, bald and old."