


Ilene Jones-Cornwell

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**Colin Powell**

(1937– )

Military leader

A four-star general in the U.S. Army, Colin Powell has been appointed to high positions in both Republican and Democratic administrations. He was the first black national security advisor and the first chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The mastermind behind the United States's involvement in the Persian Gulf War, he was involved in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Later he was pursued vigorously by the Republican Party as a vice-presidential candidate in the 1996 presidential elections. He continued to enjoy high visibility, as attested to in the *Wall Street Journal/NBC* news poll for 1997 which identified him as the most popular American.

Born on April 5, 1937, in Harlem, Colin Luther Powell is the son of Jamaican immigrants Luther Powell and Maud Ariel McKoy Powell. After immigrating to the area when he was in his early twenties, Luther Powell was a gardener on estates in Connecticut and a building superintendent in Manhattan who worked to become foreman of the shipping department of a garment manufacturer. Maud Powell, a seamstress in the garment district, was a staunch supporter of the International Garment Workers Union. At the time of Colin Powell's birth, his parents lived on Morningside Avenue, then moved to other locations before settling at 952 Kelly Street in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx when Colin Powell was six. While his parents worked, his maternal grandmother, Alice McKoy, took care of Powell and his only sibling, Marilyn, who was five and a half years older. When he was in college, his family left their decaying neighborhood and moved to their own house on Elmira Avenue in Queens.

Even though Powell came from a close-knit family and had a secure childhood, he was surrounded by and couldn't help but observe the rough life of the streets and the struggles others suffered because of the Great Depression. His neighborhood was racially mixed, consisting of Jewish, Irish, Polish, Italian, black, and Hispanic families. Most of the black families there had roots in Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, or other West Indian islands.

When Powell was promoted from the third to the fourth grade in Public School 39, he was placed in the bottom form, known as "Fore Up," meaning that he was considered a slow learner as were many black students. He was not an athlete but enjoyed street games and kite fighting. He studied piano briefly, then flute, but gave up both. When he was 14-years old, Powell had his first job at Sickser's, a baby furnishings and toy store.

In high school, Powell played on the basketball team, ran track, and for a short time was involved in the Boy Scouts. He had no special interest in either. In February 1954, two months before he was 17, Powell graduated from an accelerated program at Morris High School. He was accepted at both New York University, a private school, and City College of New York (CCNY), a public college. He chose the latter because of lower costs. To help support himself, he continued to work at various jobs on weekends and vacations, including work with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 812, and a bottling company.
At CCNY, he joined the Reserve Officer’s Training Corps (ROTC) and after being courted for membership by three military societies, joined the Pershing Rifles, the precision drill team. He found the ROTC appealing and considered the Pershing Rifles an elite group. He also enjoyed the discipline, structure, camaraderie, and sense of belonging that the Pershing Rifles provided. During his last three years of college, the drill hall became his universe and on weekends he spent up to seven hours there in practice. He remained a mediocre student through college but pulled up his grades with straight A’s in ROTC. Upon graduation from CCNY, in 1958, with a B.S. in geology and the honor of Distinguished Military Graduate, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the army.

In his autobiography, *My American Journey*, Powell acknowledged an “unpayable debt” to the New York City public system of education. He said, “I typify the students that CCNY was created to serve, the sons and daughters of the innercity, the poor, the immigrant.” Although he had a C-average, Powell added that he:

emerged from CCNY prepared to write, think, and communicate effectively and equipped to compete against students from colleges that I could never have dreamed of attending. If the Statue of Liberty opened the gateway to this country, public education opened the door to attainment here. . . . I am, consequently, a champion of public secondary and higher education.

**Army Career Begins**

Powell’s career in the U.S. Army began in 1958, with basic training in Fort Benning, Georgia, followed by his first assignment overseas, to the Third Armored Division in West Germany, for a tour of Gelnhausen, located near Frankfurt. He was indoctrinated into army life and learned that in the 48th Infantry, the care of the men was the main concern. By the end of the year, he was promoted to first lieutenant. After completing a two-year tour ending in late 1960, he was sent to Fort Devens, about 30 miles west of Boston and was assigned to the First Battle Group, Fourth Infantry, Second Infantry Brigade.

By 1961 Powell had completed the required three years of service for his ROTC experience. He knew that he was well-suited to the military and never considered leaving it. While stationed in Fort Devens, he went on a blind date with Alma Vivian Johnson, a Birmingham native, and they developed a lasting friendship that led to marriage on August 25, 1962. In the summer of 1962 Powell was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for training as a military advisor, then to war in South Vietnam for his first tour of duty. While patrolling the Laos border with an infantry battalion, he stepped into a trap and injured his foot, for which he was awarded a Purple Heart. Later that year he was awarded the Bronze Star.

Returning to the United States early in 1963, Powell had difficulty locating housing for his family in the Columbus, Georgia, area near Fort Benning, where he had been assigned. They lived in nearby Phoenix City, Alabama, instead. He had a similar experience earlier at Fort Bragg. He was also denied service at a drive-in hamburger joint unless he went to the back window. He refused to succumb to such racial discrimination. At Fort Benning, Powell completed a month-long Pathfinder course for paratroopers. Pathfinders were an elite within an elite group. He graduated number one in the class and added the Pathfinder insignia to his Combat Infantryman’s badge, airborne wings, and other decorations. After this stint, Powell was assigned to the Infantry Board at Fort Benning, where he tested new weapons and designed RAM (Reliability, Availability, and Maintainability) standards for the test. He completed the Infantry Officers Advanced Course in May of 1965, ranking first among his class of 200. He returned to the Infantry Board after completing a course for instructors and receiving an oak leaf and a promotion to major.

Powell remained at Fort Benning almost three years, then moved to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in the spring of 1967. He entered the Army’s Graduate Civil Schooling Program and was ranked among the top infantrymen in his class. From July of 1968 to July of 1969 Powell was reassigned to Vietnam, to the resurrected World War II Twenty-third Infantry Division known as Americal. He was executive officer of the Third Battalion, First Infantry, Eleventh Infantry Brigade. He was injured during a helicopter crash landing and received a Soldier’s Medal for bravery in helping rescue injured men from the burning wreckage.

Powell entered graduate school at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and graduated with a master’s degree in business administration in 1971. He had earned all A’s and one B, in computer logic. After receiving his degree, Powell was urged to study for a Ph.D., but he was eager to return to the army. In July of 1971, he was assigned to the Pentagon where he reported to lieutenant general William E. DePuy, who headed the office of the assistant vice chief of staff of the army. Powell became a White House Fellow for 1972–73, assigned to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), then headed by Caspar Weinberger. He served briefly under Frank C. Carlucci, then under Fred Malek. He refused an opportunity to remain at OMB another year, returning to the army after he had completed his assignment.

In 1973 Powell was assigned to Camp Casey in South Korea to help obstruct a possible attack by North Korea. When he returned to the United States in September of 1974, Powell was temporarily assigned to the Pentagon until his National War College (NWC) classes, for which he had been selected, began in August of 1975. In an accelerated program, he was promoted to full colonel in February of 1976, midway through the NWC. He missed the last two months of training because of a new assignment, but graduated with distinction. Powell took command of the Second Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, remaining there until 1977. He said in his autobiography that he wanted to remain at Fort Campbell to become chief of staff of the
101st Airborne. Instead, he was called back to Washington where he was assigned to the Office of the Secretary of Defense during President Jimmy Carter's administration.

Becomes a High-Ranking General

On June 1, 1979, Powell's formal promotion ceremony to brigadier general was held. President Carter made major shakeups in his cabinet, removing Joseph Califano as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, and James Schlesinger as Secretary of Energy. He assigned Charles Duncan to take over the Department of Energy. Duncan asked Powell to join his transition team, and for a brief period in 1979 Powell became Duncan's executive assistant.

When the 1980 elections were held, Powell chose to vote for Ronald Reagan instead of supporting Carter as he had done in 1976. In April of 1980 Iranian students had seized 53 Americans as hostage in the American embassy in Tehran and held them captive for five months. This incident highly influenced Powell's decision to advocate Reagan instead of Carter. Powell wrote in his autobiography that "the Carter Administration had been mauled by double-digit inflation and the humiliating spectacle of the Americans held hostage in Iran." When Reagan took office, Powell had an opportunity to become undersecretary of the army, but chose to "go back to doing what brigadier generals are supposed to do," as he wrote in his autobiography.

Powell was assigned as assistant division commander for operations and training for the Fourth Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Carson, Colorado, remaining there from 1981 to 1983. In August of 1983, Powell became deputy commander of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and headed an operation called CACDA, or Combined Arms Combat Development Activity. Those who held the position previously, found that it served as a launchpad to higher ranks. On June 19, 1983, the last days of his CACDA tour, Powell was promoted to major general. He spent only 11 months in Fort Leavenworth, then returned to Washington as military assistant to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger from 1983 to 1986. In 1986, when U.S. Congress declared that the covert sale of arms to Iran was in this country's interest, Powell wrote to National Security Council head, Admiral John Poindexter, that Congress had to be notified about the sale. Poindexter ignored the memorandum. When a scandal arose about the covert sale, however, Powell was found to have acted within the law and kept his credibility.

On March 26, 1986, Powell received a third star that went with his new job as commander of the Fifth Corps in Frankfurt, West Germany, where he had been assigned in 1986 to command 75,000 troops. On December 31, 1986, he formally gave up command and on January 2, 1987, was back in Washington as deputy assistant to President George Bush for national security affairs. Powell reorganized the National Security Council (NSC) staff and also chaired its policy review group. Powell was promoted to national security advisor on November 5, 1987. On September 20, 1988, Powell was the first national security adviser to receive the Secretary's Award, given for "distinguished contributions to the development, management, or implementation" of American foreign policy. He remained in the position until 1989.

Powell promoted to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989, the top position in the military and became a four-star general. While Powell was at Fort Leavenworth, the U.S.-based forces had been organized into two commands: FORSCOM, or U.S. Forces Command, and TRADOC, or Training and Doctrine Command. Now as chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Powell directed what he called in his autobiography "one last command," or command of FORSCOM. Through his command, Powell successfully oversaw Operation Desert Shield in 1990, where massive numbers of troops and supplies were moved to Saudi Arabia. He also directed the successful Operation Desert Storm, the offensive option developed alongside the defensive stance. Six weeks later, President Bush announced from the Oval Office that Kuwait had been liberated, Iraq's army had been defeated, and U.S. military objectives had been realized.

Powell's position also involved him in such activities as the Haitian refugee problem, or Operation Safe Harbor, the establishment of camps for Haitian refugees, a plan which Powell rejected; and by early 1992 the reduction of the armed forces by 25 percent. He also had a number of speaking engagements, including the 1992 commencement address at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, which was Alma Powell's alma mater 35 years earlier. Quoted in his autobiography, Powell talked to those gathered about family and diversity: "We must remember that America is a family. There may be differences and disputes in our family. But we must not allow the family to be broken into warring factions ... I want you to find strength in your diversity."

Powell retired from the military in September of 1993. Powell's retirement was a colorful affair broadcast nationally from the parade ground at Fort Meyer, Virginia. President Bill Clinton presented him the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction, the nation's highest civilian award.

After his retirement, Powell rejected George Bush's appeal to serve as his running mate in the 1996 presidential elections. Instead he devoted himself to writing his autobiography (published in 1995), traveling the lecture circuit, and serving on business, corporate, and academic boards. Powell was generally regarded as a mobilizer, racial healer, and great leader. In accordance with such goals, he chaired President Clinton's volunteer program for improving children's lives, called the President's Summit for America's Future. In the April 21, 1997, issue of Time, Powell said "I have arrived at the point in my life where I am trying to use what I have been given by my nation to help the nation." The President's summit kicked off the program on April 27, 1997, in Philadelphia, where Powell, Clinton, and former presidents George Bush and Jimmy Carter stood together on the steps of Independence Hall. They called for America to unite through volunteer service in what the Nashville Tennessean for April 27, 1997, identified as "an effort organizers hope will im-
prove by the end of 2000 the lives of at least 2 million of America’s 15 million poor children.’"

In an interview for Meet the Press held during the President’s Summit for America’s Future initiated on April 26, 1997, Powell said that he was comfortable and satisfied in private life; he is convinced that he made significant contributions while involved in politics and is now making important contributions as a private citizen. Time magazine named him one of the most influential people in America for 1997. When asked, ‘‘Is it fair to say that you will not be a candidate for president in the year 2000?’’ he responded, ‘‘The assumption is fair.’’

In private life, the Powells are regular worshipers at St. John’s Episcopal Church in McLean, Virginia. Although Alma Powell was baptized a Congregationalist, she became an Episcopalian while she and her husband were at Ft. Leavcnworth. The Powells have three children—Michael Kevin (b. March 23 1963), Linda (b. April 16, 1965), and Annemarie (b. May 20, 1969).

Powell stands six-feet one-inch tall and weighs around 200 pounds. He is calm, mild-mannered, skilled in dealings with civilians and military personnel, and carries himself in a military manner. He gives careful attention to detail. He is neither humble nor a bragger; he is a confident man. Throughout his life he has maintained a special fondness for automobiles and mentioned them frequently in his autobiography.

Colin Powell is a significant figure in military history. Although he is not regarded as a race man, he is an important role model for blacks in mainland America, including the West Indian immigrant. He achieved greatness because he prepared himself well for the work that he liked best, the military, and executed his assignments with dignity and exactness.

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REFERENCES

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Jessie Carney Smith

Awadagin Pratt (1966—)
Concert pianist

In 1992 a new star burst onto the American concert scene. Awadagin Pratt, the first black performer to win the coveted Naumburg International piano competition, began a professional career that was to become both wide-ranging and very demanding. He has joined a company of established black artists, including Jessye Norman, Kathleen Battle, Andre Watts, and Paul Freeman, who have garnered prominent places before the concert–going public both here and abroad.

Awadagin Pratt was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on March 6, 1966, and began studying piano when he was six years old. In 1975 his family moved to Normal, Illinois, where his parents, Mildred and Theodore Pratt, were professors of social work and nuclear physics, respectively. For Awadagin and his younger sister, Menah, the home environment included a strict regimen of piano and violin lessons, tennis lessons, and regular practice sessions. Attending public schools in Normal, he was active in athletics, and was on the tennis team at Normal Community High School, played doubles tennis with his sister, played on basketball teams, and competed in local sports tournaments.

Pratt’s interest in music soon deepened, and upon graduation from high school, he enrolled at the age of 16 at the University of Illinois, majoring in music and studying piano, violin, and conducting. In 1986 he enrolled on scholarship at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. He continued in their study program, earning performance diplomas in piano and violin in 1989 and a graduate performing diploma in conducting in 1992. He thus became Peabody’s first student to earn three performance diplomas.

Continuing in private study, Pratt began preparing for a concert career. He entered the 1992 Naumburg International piano composition and won first prize, the first black American to win this prestigious award. After several major concert successes, he was awarded the Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1994, and his full-time concert career continued at a rapid pace.

Colin Powell delivered his presentation making the case for war with Iraq at the United Nations 15 years ago, on February 5, 2003. As much criticism as Powell received for this— he’s called it “painful” and something that will “always be a part of my record”— it hasn’t been close to what’s justified. Powell, who was secretary of state under President George W. Bush, was much more than just horribly mistaken: He fabricated evidence and ignored repeated warnings that what he was saying was false.