

BOOK BREAK

Powell: I'm a hard-working everyman



ESTHER LITTMANN

Most of us would agree that genius is an enigma. It bursts forth, often with roots so slender that its achievements defy analysis. Such is the case of Colin Powell, whose life surely demonstrates a genius to lead that cannot easily be traced to his early developmental years or

to his formal education.

In his autobiography, "My American Journey" (Random House, 1995), Powell modestly portrays himself as "everyman," an example of what most anyone can accomplish in America with diligence and dedication. But few would argue that Powell's nature includes one trait that most people lack: leadership ability that builds bridges and inspires others to perform at their best.

Born in Harlem to Jamaican immigrants, Colin Powell grew up in the South Bronx, a rough neighborhood even then. His mother and father worked in the garment industry while young Colin and his older sister, Marilyn, were left alone or with relatives and neighbors after school.

A mediocre student, Powell showed

little focus or academic aptitude in his teen years, much to the consternation of his ambitious parents. Known as a "good boy" but with no special distinction, he graduated from high school with a C+ average.

Yet his parents' example, the love and laughter of his extended family, and his West Indian roots, which, as Powell makes clear, gave his family a "sense of independence, self-responsibility and self-worth" left their mark. Once asked to unload a truck full of baby furnishings for a neighborhood business, the 14-year-old Colin worked so fast that the owner observed, "So, you're a worker," and hired him on the spot. Later, the same dedication to duty meant a summer job promotion, from floor mopper to shift leader of a bottling plant. These early signs were certainly a prescription for stability and modest success, yet no hint of what was to come.

One wonders what Powell would have made of his life if he hadn't joined the Army ROTC while attending City College of New York. From the first, he felt distinctive and dedicated to a way of life characterized by order, discipline and camaraderie.

"I became a leader almost immediately," he writes. "I found a selflessness

within our ranks that reminded me of the caring atmosphere within my family. Race, color, background, income meant nothing. . . . If this is what soldiering was all about, then maybe I wanted to be a soldier."

Having found his calling, there was no stopping Powell. Although his academic performance improved, scholarship still wasn't his strong suit. Most of his learning, it seems, occurred not in the classroom but in interaction with others, in situations of give and take that honed his leadership skills. To fill considerable gaps in his knowledge and experience, Powell selected models and mentors from his superiors, remaking himself in their mold. This combination of humility and self-esteem, the recognition that he had much to learn and the confidence that he would succeed, continued to nurture his genius.

Soon Powell accepted nothing but the best from himself and others, yet his new-found perfectionism was always tempered by humanity and a sense of humor.

General Powell's unspooled and optimistic attitude prevailed throughout his meteoric rise to the top. As a young infantry lieutenant in Germany, his articulate performance in a military trial taught him that he could "assimilate a

mass of raw information, pound it into a coherent shape, and communicate it intelligibly, even persuasively."

Later, Powell discovered the art of diplomacy when, as senior military adviser, he led his Vietnamese troops into the tropical jungles to fight against the Viet Cong. Upon learning that his soldiers were attempting to fell a large tree by "shooting" it down, Powell refrained from criticism and simply pointed out the exorbitant cost of such an operation. The Vietnamese captain immediately concluded that shooting down a tree was wasteful and ordered the action stopped.

"I have always liked the maxim," Powell writes, "that there is no end to what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit."

Several years later in Korea, Powell battled the enemy from within, drug and alcohol abuse that infested the American military at that time. With a combination of benevolence and ingenuity, he helped restore discipline and morale to his battalion.

When the author returned to Washington, D.C., he studied the works of Prussian military historian Karl von Clausewitz at the National War Col-

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