

Photo: Shepard Sherbell/SABA



It's a long journey from New York's South Bronx to Washington, D.C., from childhood to becoming the top military officer in the nation and advisor to three presidents. It's even longer when you are a black man. That is the journey taken by General Colin L. Powell, this year's recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind, presented by the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases.

When Gen. Powell retired from the Army in 1993, he had been the youngest chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and had held the highest military position in the Department of Defense. Along the way, he had earned five combat medals, including the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart—after being wounded during his first assignment in Vietnam—in addition to receiving numerous other military and civilian awards.

*General Colin L. Powell*  
*Recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn*  
*Carter Award for*  
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*Health of Humankind*

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Gen. Powell was born in New York City in 1937. His parents, Luther and Maud Powell, had emigrated from Jamaica 20 years before. His father was a shipping clerk in New York's garment district; his mother was a seamstress. "They didn't earn much money, but it was enough to provide us with the necessities of life," their son recalls. "The greatest gift my parents gave me was their unconditional love and a set of values, including an understanding of the difference between right and wrong, a belief in God, and the importance of hard work and education."

As a college student at the City College of New York (CCNY), Colin Powell was fortunate in finding that the road to national leadership lay in military service. "Mine is the story of a black kid with no early promise from a family of limited means, who somehow rose to become national security advisor to the president of the United States and then

chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” he writes in his autobiography, which he aptly titled *My American Journey*.

While at CCNY, he joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps. He says today he isn’t sure why, but when he got his uniform, “it gave me a sense of belonging, something I had never experienced all the while I was growing up; I felt distinctive.”

Gen. Powell attributes his success to hard work and good luck. There is little doubt about the hard work. No task he was assigned was too menial to perform to the best of his ability—one of the reasons for his later success.

He felt fortunate to choose the Army as his career. Ten years earlier, in 1943, President Harry Truman had ordered the end of segregation in the armed forces. “The Army was living the democratic ideal ahead of the rest of America,” Gen. Powell notes. “There was less discrimination, a truer merit system inside the gates of our military posts than outside. The Army made it easier for me to love my country with all its flaws and serve her with all my heart.” This fact about military service gets too little attention, he believes.

In 1962, First Lieutenant Powell married Alma Vivian Johnson of Birmingham, AL, an audiologist then working at the Boston Guild for the Hard of Hearing. They have three children: Michael, Linda, and Annemarie.

Service in Germany, Vietnam, Korea, and military posts in the United States followed. In 1971, the Army sent then Major Powell to George Washington University in Washington, D.C., to



earn a master’s degree at the School of Government and Business Administration.

The following year, he was awarded a White House Fellowship in the Office of Management and Budget. The Fellowship program is designed to show bright, young individuals how public policy is shaped. After the Fellowship, then Lieutenant Colonel Powell was assigned to the Pentagon for the first time and served on the Army staff.

In 1983, by this time a two-star general, he returned to the Pentagon and became assistant to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. As Mr. Weinberger’s senior military assistant for the next three years, Gen. Powell acquired a reputation as the ideal colleague. He carefully screened both information and visitors to ensure a free flow of ideas without burdening his boss with minor details. He displayed a marked ability to work amicably with different groups of people on sensitive matters.



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In 1987, he was appointed deputy to Frank Carlucci, President Reagan's national security advisor. A year later, he succeeded Carlucci as national security advisor to President Reagan.

Gen. Powell served three presidents during his time on active duty helping to shape defense and foreign policy in top national security posts—the last as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1989 to 1993.

Gen. Powell spent the first two years of his retirement writing his autobiography. After its publication in 1995, he went on a book tour; long lines formed at bookstores across the country. By the time the tour was over, he had signed over 60,000 copies of his book.

The book and tour helped reinforce his status as a national figure. He had also received notoriety as a popular public speaker. He was encouraged to run for president as a Republican in the 1996 election. Gen. Powell described himself as a conservative on fiscal issues and a moderate on social ones. "I was probably very much in step with the mainstream," he said. But, in the end, despite the pressures, he decided against running for political office. "I do not yet have a passion and commitment for political life," he said at the time.

Thirty-five years in the Army had indoctrinated Gen. Powell "to give back to this country as much as it has given to us," as he puts it. He felt he had a commitment to youth—the next generation. He serves on the Board of Governors of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, is a member of the Advisory Board of the Children's Health Fund, is on the Board of Trustees of

Howard University in Washington, D.C., and is on the Board of Directors of the United Negro College Fund.

Last spring, he became general chairman of the Presidents' Summit for America's Future held in Philadelphia and sponsored by both President Clinton and former President George Bush. He has become chairman of the follow-on national organization, America's Promise—the Alliance for Youth, devoted to improving the lives of the nation's at-risk young people.

"During my travels around the country," Gen. Powell writes in *The Brookings Review*, "visiting inner city neighborhoods and talking to the kids I've met there, I have been struck again and again by the stark differences between their childhood and my own." He recalls the matchless blessing of two devoted parents and a whole platoon of aunts and uncles. "They gave me the love, discipline, and motivation to succeed."

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Too many of today's kids are not getting the same kind of nurturing environment, he explains. Too many are growing up in dysfunctional families; too many are being lost to child abuse and street violence. Too many are having children while they are still children themselves. "In the past three and a half years," he says, "I have seen children and young people who are in desperate need of the bare essentials required to pave the way to becoming successful adults."

He remembers how, as a boy, education was regarded as the escape hatch, "the way up and out for West Indians," and he worries about the quality of youngsters' education today. "They are growing up unable to find their places in today's complex, information-driven economy. Too many are heading for stunted lives of dependency or crime and are in real danger of losing faith in the promise of America.

"The results are all around us," he says.

"Drug addiction, crime, and lack of discipline, are creating a cancer in our society." The devastating result is that a large number of our young people, as many as 15 million, he estimates, are not being prepared for the future. They are in danger of being lost for good unless the more fortunate among us step forward and lend a hand.

Under Gen. Powell's leadership, the Philadelphia summit set forth five basic resources that our young people need to become successful adults.

They are as follows:

- An ongoing relationship with a caring adult or mentor;
- Safe places to learn and grow during non-school hours;
- A healthy start and a healthy future;
- A marketable skill through effective education; and
- An opportunity to give back through community service.

These resources will be made available to at least two million youths by the end of the century, he claims. By mounting a campaign called America's Promise, Gen. Powell plans to redeem the Philadelphia pledge. However, he warns, "America's Promise can not restore the civil society by itself, but rallying Americans around a campaign to help young people get a decent start in life is a big step in the right direction."