Adam Powell, Jr.: Black American

by Henry Paul Orr

ELDRIDGE Cleaver, Malcolm X, H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King Jr., and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. are representative of famous black leaders who have rallied around the banner of equality and freedom for the black man in America, socially, economically and politically. Even though united in "the" Cause, each expressed different conceptual approaches to the problems and each possessed a distinct philosophy. The intent of this study is to reflect on the actions of Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr., throughout his life toward developing a profile of his philosophy. In retrospect, one writer stated, "Powell has been one of the most controversial and newsworthy figures in public life . . . His eloquent articulation of his convictions on racial equality and his personal dynamism have won him hordes of idolators and hordes of detractors."[1]

In *Marching Blacks*, Powell describes his fundamental background by stating:

> . . . I am a product of—the sustained indignation of a branded grandfather, the militant protest of my grandmother, the disciplined resentment of my father and mother, and the power of mass action of the church. I am a new Negro—a marching black.[2]

In his autobiography, *Adam by Adam*, Powell continues to provide descriptive analysis of his life by stating:

> My father was a kingdom-seeker. He believed that the mere act of seeking the kingdom brought all things you needed unto you. . . . I am another witness that when a man seeks a kingdom on earth and puts that trust into his life, loves the people of the earth, friend and foe, black and white, then the beautiful and the ugly even if in that loving he sometimes is unable to have the time to love an individual, then "All things will be added unto him!"

These passages demonstrate Reverend Powell's purpose in life and the strength of his will power to prevail. His conceptual approach of describing his family to emphasize his own characteristics had in essence designed a contextual map, an overview of his own life. Powell, like his father, was goal-oriented and a self-actualizing person who believed that each person's life had a purpose, with certain truths relative to that purpose or goal in life. Essentially it appears to be a pragmatic approach to life based on subsequent events in Powell's life.

The term 'pragmatism' ought to be understood at this time before continuing. Pragmatism is used in philosophy to describe a method, a doctrine, and a theory. A Cornelius Benjamin defined the pragmatic theory of truths as a "Theory of knowledge which maintains that the truth of a proposition is determined by its practical consequences."[4] In reflection, Powell's descriptive analysis of his characteristics exemplified his practical approach to his life in relationship to his genealogy. Therefore, when Reverend Powell Jr. served as acting minister, due to his father's nervous breakdown, of the Abyssinian Baptist Church he was to utilize the strategy of resentment, indignation, and radicalism as his tools in mass action toward economic and political equality in Harlem for blacks and other minorities. Gwen Jones, a member of Abyssinian Baptist Church, relates the historical significance of the church:

> Its a historic Baptist church, started by a group of Ethiopians who were not slaves, but rich merchants. They came to New York and found that they would have to sit in the gallery of the First Baptist Church downtown. So they set up their own church and named it after their homeland. Ethiopia was once named Abyssinia.[5]

Implicit to the pragmatic realism of Reverend Powell as spiritual leader of Abyssinian Baptist Church was his interpretation of religion and his approach to being a minister. In February, 1930 he was converted to mysticism. In the Prologue of his autobiography Powell emphatically states, ". . . . I am a mystic. I am a mystic because I have touched the intangible . . . heard the inaudible . . . and seen the invisible."[6] Reverend Powell clarified the meaning of mysticism by saying it was not fear, another-worldiness, fantasy, apparition, or illusion. He interpreted mysticism to be an awareness without proof transcending relativity to the everydayness of life and touching on the absolute. He relates the experience of his first sermon on Good Friday, April 18, 1930:

> . . . I preached my trial sermon. It was a strange crowd that listened—all the girls from the Cotton Club, others from the downtown night clubs, girls of every color, bootleggers, gamblers, all the fantastic array of acquaintances I had accumulated through the years—I can still remember the sight. They all came to laugh. Adam's going to preach! Adam, who played one of the best games of stud poker, who had bet every cent he had in his pocket on one roll of dice, who had slept with more women than anyone could count, and who could hold more liquor than anybody in his circle, was going to be a preacher! . . .

The justification of Powell being minister of Abyssinian Baptist Church or any church in spite of the fact that he proclaimed to be a minister who drank, gambled and wenched was based on his practical approach to the fact that he did not practice hypocrisy, anthropomorphism or prejudice. He interpreted life and religion to be a reflection of his individual credo:

> There is no heaven or hell in the sense that they are places to which one goes after death. The heaven or hell to which one goes is right there in the span of years that we spend in this body on this earth.[7]

Therefore in spite of his proclivity for fun and games, Reverend Powell still became a minister of the church; simply because of his understanding of his selfhood, which enabled him to embrace mysticism for direct communion with God and to be a pragmatic realist. Pragmatic Realism is "the doctrine that knowledge comes by way of action. . . . [and] the mind is not outside the realm of nature; in experience the organism and the world are at one . . . . Ideas and knowledge are instruments for activity and not spectators of an outside realm."[8] Also keep in perspective that the first essential of mysticism is to have ". . . . the clear conviction of a living God as the primary interest of consciousness, and of a personal self capable of communion with Him."[9]

Utilizing the church like the hub of a wheel during the Great Depression, Reverend Powell's outreach program encompassed many projects such as a relief kitchen,' and a relief program designed to instill pride and dignity by giving people money if, and only if they worked for it; even if they cleaned the same area all day, every day. Reverend Powell also organized rent strikes: if one tenant was evicted for nonpayment of rent, then all the tenants of that building stopped paying rent in an effort to compel the landlord to take the evicted tenant back. Realizing the power of mass action, Powell organized boycotts of Harlem merchants, demanding better hiring policies from large corporations such as, Consolidated Edison, the Telephone Company and the Omnibus Corporation. In the case of Consolidated Edison; one night of the week was designated "lightless night" when the residential and business community would literally turn off every light. The merchants feeling the economic squeeze put pressure on Consolidated Edison to hire blacks and other minority groups. Finally Consolidated Edison did hire blacks.

In the case of the Telephone Company several weeks of picketing and sustained dialing of the operator to disrupt the telephone system's new method to call for information, "dial the operator", enabled blacks to be hired by the Telephone Company as a compromise to eliminate the boycotting and disruption of service by mass dialing of the operator. Against the public bus company, Harlem abstained from using its services. Therefore after several weeks the bus company started to hire blacks.

Reverend Powell had the necessary coalition in 1941 to run for and be elected to the city of New York council. The success realized by Powell during the previous years of radical and militant actions had perfected his ability to compromise, to settle differences by arbitration and mutual concessions. He served three years as a councilman in New York City. When Congressional redistricting occured in 1944, Harlem became a new congressional district which could elect its own representative to Congress. Reverend Powell's interest in the congressional seat became known after he had ascertained whether A. Phillip Randolph, a powerful and famous black man in Harlem, would take up the political banner. Mr. Randolph declined to run for Congress and supported Reverend Powell for election.

Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s emphasis of his militancy by labeling himself as the first "bad nigger" in Congress had its shock value. Yet it revealed various other ramifications to his concept of militancy. He utilized the pulpit to advance his militancy and power structure. On May 4, 1945 Reverend Powell, Jr. received a letter[10] from one of the visitors to Abyssinian Baptist Church concerning the previous Sunday sermon. The following is an excerpt from that letter:

> You are militant all right, but it seems that you turned your guns on people who worship you, and dared them to feel and think like human beings. Part of your responsibility as a Negro leader among those who may not have had the advantages of formal education is to help people to think and act independently.
>
> . . . Please stop and take stock of yourself. You are moving too fast. Catch up with yourself. Take a deep breath of clean, fresh air, and start again and erase the picture of an immature man drunk with power . . .

The so-called "bad nigger" of Congress was also the "bad nigger" of the pulpit.

Reverend Powell was a kingdom seeker. It seems to be that his actions or methods were considered to be dehumanizing, yet still having value to him. To Powell the action he took as minister or politician was justified by the consequence of the act. It that meant hurting or humiliating others then it had to be done. Yet, he was elected to a Congress that had unwritten rules for black Congressmen which Powell immediately attacked for their unfairness, but his sphere of influence was limited. Therefore, the "Powell Amendment" was created to influence the bills that his committee in the House of Representative's Education and Labor Committee handled. The Powell Amendment was attached to congressional bills or legislation to deny federal funds to those school districts that continued to practice segregation. It was attached to the federal school lunch program law on June 4, 1946, and other education bills throughout the years. Powell's amendment served as a very effective tool for his kingdom seeking.

When Powell first entered Congress as an elected official he sponsored the Fair Employment Practice Commission Bill, which he drafted from the same bill introduced in New York State. The bill was held up in committee for four years. In 1960 Congressman Powell was selected to chair a special subcommittee on the FEPC bill. The FEPC bill was considered to be a political football. The bill would eliminate discrimination in employment for reasons of race, color, or creed.[11] To eliminate the factions claiming that the FEPC bill was communist inspired Congressman Powell personally selected Richard Milhouse Nixon to serve on the special subcommittee for the FEPC bill. Ironically Nixon voted against the bill in subcommittee. The FEPC bill was finally defeated in a floor vote, and a weaker bill passed.

Congressman Powell served ten years more before gaining leadership of the House education and labor committee. Also during those ten years he was beset with income tax problems. In March 1960 the case of The United States of America v. Mr. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. in the U.S. District Court of New York City started. He was being tried for federal income tax evasion, on his joint income return filed in 1952 for the 1951 tax year. The question is why did it take eight years to reach the court. Newsweek implied in its editorial on May 5, 1958 that Powell threw his political support to the Eisenhower-Nixon republican ticket in 1956 only because of a deal to ease the pressure by the Treasury investigation of his income status. On October 11, 1956 Congressman Powell had a meeting with the President of the United States after which the democrat and national Negro leader openly supported the Republican ticket. Immediately after the national election, Thomas A. Bolan an Assistant federal attorney started to investigate Powell's tax status.[12]

That investigation came to a halt after Bolan was told by the Attorney General's office the case was too hot to handle. The Bolan investigation was relinquished to the New York branch of the I.R.S. which refused to carry it any further. But that would not be the end of the Powell tax case. Thomas A. Bolan resigned and later reported his story of the bizarre events to the *National Review*. William F. Buckley Jr. utilized the critical review of Edward Bennett Williams' book *One Man's Freedom* to set the searchlight on the Adam Powell case which differed from Williams' account as Powell's attorney. Buckley recalled the campaign the *National Review* undertook to get the wheels of justice going again. The *National Review's* scorching research and editorials provided proof about the alleged deal that took place between the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration and Congressman Powell.[13] Powell gained an acquittal on the charges in May of 1960. But while he was being raked through the courts for income tax evasion the democratic political machine rejected him in New York City. The Tammany organization rejected the opportunity to endorse Powell for the democratic ticket for his congressional seat based on the Powell declaration for the 1956 Republican ticket.

Carmen Desapio, Tammany Boss of New York City, and Hulan Jack, Borough President were trying to take over political control of Harlem from Powell and to block his perennial renomination to Congress. To the surprise of his critics and political opponents Powell won both the Republican and Democratic nominations for Congress running as an independent.[14] His victory was a total defeat for the Tammany political machine. But the compromise prevailed, wherein Powell's political machine would support Averell Harriman for the Governorship, if the Tammany machine would back Powell for the chairmanship of the House Educational and Labor committee.[15]

George Meany President of the AFL-CIO believed that Congressman Powell would not become a good chairman for the House committee on Education and Labor. Meany supported his belief with the following reason: "Because of his record in Congress and his record as district leader in New York — in . . . using his position to stir up racial hatred at the least provocation."[16] Even the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People admonished Congressman Powell for "extreme racialism" and speaking against civil rights.[16]

In 1960 Powell began a campaign against the policy racket of New York City. In the midst of the campaign, Powell named Mrs. Esther James, a Negro domestic in his district, as the go-between person that passed pay off money to the city police department. Mrs. James, a private citizen, sued for defamation of character. The jury found Powell guilty and awarded Mrs. James a judgment of over $46,000 after an appeal of the original judgment of $210,000. To render himself judgment proof Powell had transferred several of his assets. The State Supreme Court ruled that action to be criminal contempt, because Powell had not paid any of the judgment. The Court requested his presence to examine his financial situation. Powell had been, before the State Supreme Court decision, in civil contempt for nonpayment of the judgment.[16] In New York City a person in civil contempt of the courts could not be arrested on Sunday; therefore Powell could enter New York City on Sunday and preach to his congregation without fear of arrest. That particular action was called the "Powell Plan" in an editorial of *The Christian Century*. "The Plan was based on three assumptions: (1) ministers like to work on Sundays; (2) ministers do not like to work on the other six days; (3) ministers are judged by their performance on Sundays."[17]

In the mid sixties Powell came under severe criticism from the *National Review* for his actions in New York City and in Congress. The Review stated: "Everyone knows now what he is: a bare demagogue, a scoundrel, a liar, a duly adjudged slanderer, a fugitive from legal process."[18] His congregation rallied around him and started to raise the money necessary to satisfy the judgment. Even while he was in exile at his Bimini retreat, Powell continued to control the political machine he had developed. Shana Alexander in an article from *Life Magazine* characterized a very important view of Reverend Powell:

> For all the familiars, Powell has been a vigorous and responsible civil rights crusader for 35 years. He has preached and practiced nonviolent direct social action since the 1930's and today he is the most interesting, and politically effective negro leader. I do not find him the most admirable, and one might wish he had served Harlem better—but few others have served Harlem at all.[19]

In 1965 Allan Keller, a reporter for the New York World suggested that Powell's white supporters ought to give up on him changing and the Negro people ought to stop him from bringing shame and disgust to their race.[20] In December of 1966 James A. Wechsler, a reporter for the New York Post interviewed Mr. A. Phillip Randolph concerning formation of a committee to support Powell's seating as a congressman and Chairman of the Education and Labor Committee. Randolph commented on the Powell actions in a series of statements:

> One can question the manner in which he carries out his plan, many times I have not agreed with his procedure . . . He is a sort of aggressive type of civic, with his own way of doing things . . . He has been guilty of mistakes of judgment. . . . There are many questions about his activities that have not been adjudicated. . . . I often differ with his modus operandi.[20]

Randolph has provided an analysis of the pragmatic way that Powell demonstrated throughout his life, yet, Powell's handling of the Ester James affair and his subsequent actions combined with his history of being outspoken in Congress about civil rights had gained him many detractors in Congress.

In those 1966 pre-election days, the most frequently heard charges against Powell had been that he had used his committee's funds to purchase airline tickets for private vacations, and that, in violation of the federal law restricting congressional staff salaries to those performing services either in Washington or the member's home district, Powell had included on his official payroll—at a handsome salary—a person who spent all her time in Puerto Rico, his wife. Some had also suggested that Powell had employed for congressional services a lady, who actually served as his housekeeper.

In those 1966 pre-election days a good deal of talk had also been heard about Powell's court problems, about his troubles with a New York widow he had called a "bag woman," and about a member of his staff, a Miss Universe contestant, who was his travelling companion.[21]

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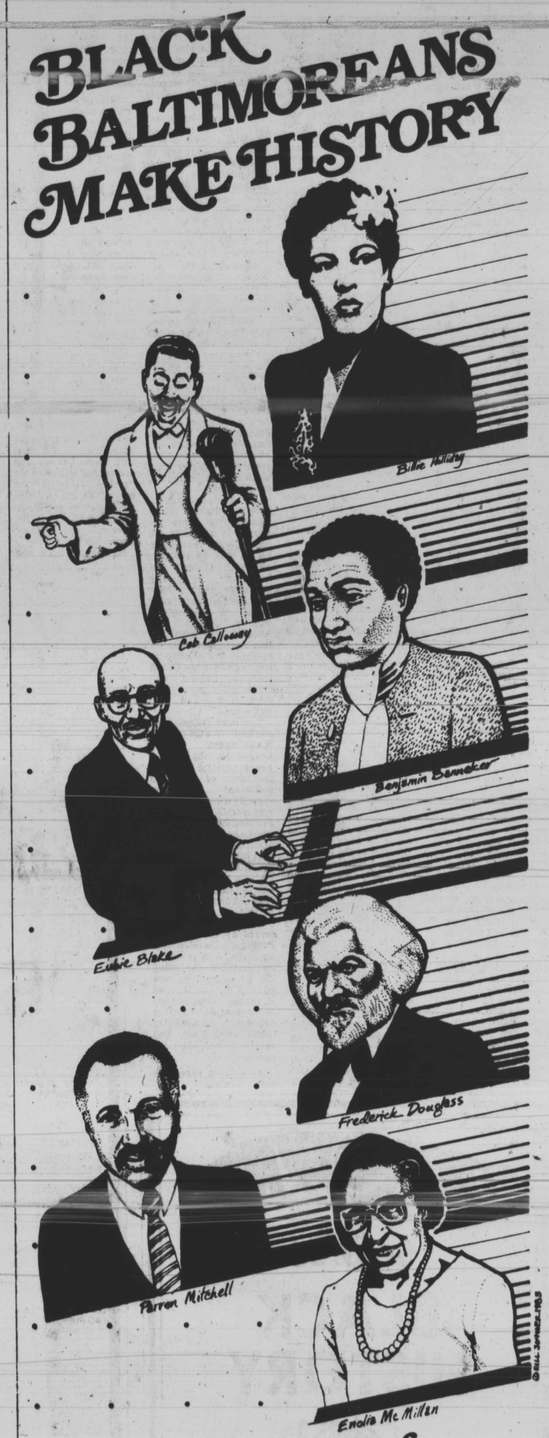

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