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THE RISE AND FALL OF ADAM CLAYTON POWELL

By David J. Garrow

ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR. *The Political Biography of an American Dilemma*.
By Charles V. Hamilton. Atheneum. 545 pp. Illustrated. \$24.95.

Two decades after his death, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. is probably better remembered for his defiantly playboy lifestyle than for the important political stature he had within black America from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s. A highly talented but tragically self-destructive figure, Powell became the first African American to hold a position of significant power in the US Congress, but failed to come even close to realizing his tremendous political potential because of his resolute cynicism and lack of self-discipline.

Charles V. Hamilton's thoughtful and carefully-measured biography is the first serious book ever written on Powell, and while it was certainly not Hamilton's intent, the cumulative result of Hamilton's work is a sadly devastating portrait of unfulfilled promise and poignant travail. But if the 535 current members of Congress, as well as elected officials elsewhere, would take the opportunity to ponder and reflect upon Hamilton's sad story of how Powell's compulsively self-serving nature brought both his public and his private life to utter ruin, some very considerable good might come from this otherwise inescapably depressing story.

Powell first attained public office -- a seat on the New York City Council -- at the young age of 33, in large part because of his good fortune in having succeeded his father as senior pastor of Harlem's powerful Abyssinian Baptist Church four years earlier in 1937. But Powell's early electoral success was also rooted in the energetic and sometimes successful protest activism that brought him to the wider attention of Harlem citizens throughout the mid- and late 1930s. Powell repeatedly displayed an impressive knack for knowing how to dramatize and symbolize America's discriminatory racial hypocrisies, but even in these early years of valuable activism, Powell developed "an image of vacillation and untrustworthiness" among close colleagues who often found him "fickle and self-promoting."

Powell moved up to a seat in the US House of Representatives in 1945, and quickly made a national name for himself among African Americans by his resolute willingness to confront racist congressional colleagues and publicly challenge discriminatory federal policies. Powell's attendance and roll-call voting records within the House were never good, and in later years were often among the very worst in Congress, but his dedication in challenging mistreatment of blacks both by and within the federal government and the armed services resulted in significant improvements, especially during the 1950s.

But Powell's longstanding reputation for unpredictability and spotlight-seeking behavior only grew over the years. When his surprise endorsement of President Dwight D. Eisenhower for reelection in 1956 drew heavy criticism from other black leaders who asserted that Powell had

changed his convictions, he flippantly but all-too-revealingly responded that "I didn't have any convictions to change."

In 1961, thanks to the congressional seniority system, Powell became the chairman of the important House Education and Labor Committee, "the strongest position a black person had ever attained" in the US government up until that time. Both for civil rights and for the rapidly emerging issue of poverty in America, Powell's chairmanship represented potentially a very important resource for America's disfavored. Initially his new position made Powell a somewhat more self-disciplined politician, but he was "still afflicted by the travel bug and short attention span," and throughout the following several years, Powell made relatively few significant contributions as landmark civil- rights, poverty and education bills made their way through Congress and into law.

While increasingly viewed as a legislative nonperformer, Powell never lost his remarkable gift for the telling phrase and the sarcastic wisecrack. Although many African Americans viewed him as a classic "race man," the light-skinned Powell (who actually passed for white as a college freshman) was not a prisoner of any ideology. "A fascist is a fascist where he is black or white, brown or yellow," he once wrote, and in Congress, Powell took the lead in introducing a bill authorizing the naturalization and admission of Koreans to the United States. "It's not the color of your skin but the way you think that makes you what you are," Powell stressed late in life.

But in his private life, Powell was often as irresponsible as he was with his congressional power, behaving callously toward a succession of wives and leading Hamilton to term him "a self-centered person . . . who could be brutal in personal relations." CORE cofounder and director James Farmer later reasoned that Powell was not immoral but amoral, yet NAACP president Arthur Spingarn put it much more bluntly, calling Powell "a tragedy. If he had character, he'd be a great man."

By 1966, events were closing in on Powell from two sides. A long-running defamation suit brought by a Harlem woman whom Powell in 1960 had called a "bag woman" for carrying gambling payoffs to corrupt lawmen had left the defiant Powell facing both a heavy financial judgment and the threat of arrest whenever he set foot in New York. Equally important, Powell's behavior both within and outside Congress had resulted in his losing the respect of almost all his colleagues. Among other representatives, Hamilton notes, Powell "had a reputation for not always honoring his commitments, and even misstating the facts." Even in his own committee "his promise to show up for a crucial session or vote could not be relied upon," and in some instances, perhaps as a result of alcohol, Powell's behavior was simply inexplicable. In January 1967, one troubled White House aide recounted to Lyndon Johnson a long phone conversation he had had with chairman Powell, carefully explaining to the president that "throughout the conversation he Powell had the impression that he had been talking with the President rather than with me."

Two months later, ostensibly because of Powell's extensive misuse of House funds as well as his defiance of the New York courts, the full membership of the House overrode a gentler committee recommendation and voted 307-116 to exclude Powell from the seat to which he once again had been elected. Powell challenged his exclusion in the federal courts while simultaneously winning

reelection to the "vacant" seat, but his return to Congress, even when coupled with a significant 1969 Supreme Court decision voiding his short-lived expulsion, proved a very hollow triumph, for he was no longer a meaningful member of the House, and his health was in increasingly precipitous decline. In fall 1970, Powell was defeated for reelection by Charles Rangel (who still holds the seat), and less than two years later, Powell was dead at 63.

At the end of this valuable and conscientious biography, Hamilton is resolutely nonjudgmental as he describes Powell's successes and failures. For many readers, Hamilton's reticence may make Powell seem a less compelling, less dramatic figure than the news coverage of the 1960s made him appear.

But in the end, Hamilton concludes this solid book with a sad but true evaluation that even Powell's fans cannot reject. Like others in public office (in Massachusetts and elsewhere) even today, Powell "was never able to subordinate his personal desires to an obvious obligation for probity that his self-chosen role of public leader would require. In this he was his own worst enemy. And, it must be said, the people who needed him most were deprived of the greater leadership he could have provided." That was the greatest tragedy of Adam Powell, just as it is the greatest tragedy of other memorable figures who have graced the political stage.

David J. Garrow's book about Martin Luther King Jr., "Bearing the Cross," won the Pulitzer Prize. He is at work on a book about *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Roe v. Wade*.