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On The Road to the White House;

'My American Journey' leaves little doubt that Colin Powell believes his 'debt' of service is not yet fully paid

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MY AMERICAN JOURNEY, by Colin L. Powell and Joseph E. Persico. Random House, 560 pp., \$ 25.95.

MAKE NO mistake about it, Colin Powell wants to be president of the United States. What's more, almost anyone who reads this splendid and warmly personal autobiography is likely to finish it quite convinced that Powell's character and judgment make him far more qualified to occupy the Oval Office than either the incumbent or any of the currently declared Republican challengers.

Sure, "My American Journey" includes some pro-forma declarations that a presidential candidacy would require "a calling I do not yet hear." But its text is replete - no doubt very intentionally - with statement after statement suggesting that once Powell's month-long book tour is complete, he'll be all ears if public reaction indicates that he could indeed successfully challenge Bill Clinton.

The book's most notable new revelation directly relates to such a possible Powell-Clinton face-off: last Dec. 18, in a private, early-morning White House meeting, Bill Clinton asked Powell to join his administration as secretary of state.

Powell refused, and the man he would have supplanted, Warren Christopher, remains in place. Powell says it was "a hard call," and that he and Clinton have remained "in close touch," but Powell confesses that in telling the president no, "Left unspoken were my reservations about the amorphous way" the Clinton administration has handled American foreign policy.

Powell is too polite to say explicitly that he knows he would be a better president than any of the three men he's served as national security adviser (Ronald Reagan) and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (George Bush and Clinton), but "My American Journey" leaves little doubt as to Powell's private belief.

And Powell's professional record, especially as presented in this winsomely written book, is one that even jaded journalistic naysayers will have a tough time demeaning. As a young Army officer, Powell spent seven months in combat in the A Shau valley of Vietnam in 1963, getting to know death at first hand. He served a second tour of duty in Vietnam in 1968-69, and he came

away from those experiences with strong feelings about how White House policy-makers and Pentagon commanders had misserved the American people.

"My American Journey" is relentlessly unapologetic in depicting how Powell's deep reluctance to commit American troops to ill-defined foreign involvements stems directly from his own experience in Vietnam. "You do not squander courage and lives without clear purpose, without the country's backing and without full commitment," he insists. "War should be the politics of last resort," and generals should not shy from insisting on clearly defined and carefully thought-out orders. "Politicians start wars; soldiers fight and die in them."

Powell's account of the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War with Iraq may intrigue students of the Bush administration with its chilly treatment of Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, its dismissive portrait of Vice President Dan Quayle and its ambiguous depiction of overly temperamental field General Norman Schwarzkopf, but the command-level portions of Powell's book are less riveting than the more personally revealing earlier chapters. Powell makes clear his deep personal affection for George Bush, but he twice indicates that the recent American president he most respects is another ex-general, Dwight D. Eisenhower, "a president who did not stampede his nation into every world trouble spot."

The most compelling parts of Powell's autobiography concern his early life in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, his blossoming as a young ROTC enlistee during his undergraduate years at the City College of New York and the deep joy he felt as a young officer committed to making the Army his career. Powell's Jamaica-born parents both worked steady jobs in Manhattan's garment district, and for "a black kid of no early promise from an immigrant family of limited means," the Army's early adoption of nondiscriminatory personnel practices offered an unparalleled opportunity for steady advancement; this led, in 1979, to Powell becoming America's youngest brigadier general at the age of 42. Married in 1962 to Birmingham, Ala., native Alma Johnson, Powell and his wife have raised three children, all of whom are graduates of Virginia's College of William and Mary.

"My American Journey" readily acknowledges that Colin Powell has never been a goody-goody - telling how he hid a six-pack of beer in a toilet tank during summer camp and, much later, took part in a drunken brawl in a South Korean bar. He forthrightly admits to a proclivity for foul language, and confesses that his driving record includes speeding tickets for up to 90 miles an hour. Powell charmingly relates how his parents were able to buy a single-family house in the Hollis section of Queens only because his numbers-playing father finally hit it big for 10 grand, and he self-deprecatingly discloses that his favorite hobby is fixing up decrepit Volvos: "Getting grimy under the hood of a car remains my happiest pastime."

Of course, it remains to be seen whether the White House's putting green and tennis court will have to make way for a mechanic's bay come January, 1997. Powell reveals that he voted for Jimmy Carter in 1976, then for Ronald Reagan in 1980, and he stresses that he's never been enrolled in any political party. He insists that "I am not ideologically liberal or conservative," and at one point, he writes that "I don't even know what I am politically."

Powell's closing epilogue, however, is far less coy, as he volunteers that "To sum up my political philosophy, I am a fiscal conservative with a social conscience." He opines that America needs to "re-establish moral standards," that "jobs are the best answers to most of our social ills," and that "either we reduce the entitlement system or we raise taxes to pay for it" - and he explicitly says that taxes need to be cut, not increased.

Powell remains unalterably opposed to allowing gay Americans to serve openly in the military, and he expressly signals his opposition to many present-day racial preference policies, commenting that "preferential treatment . . . demeans the achievements that minority Americans win by their own efforts . . . I benefited from equal opportunity and affirmative action in the Army, but I was not shown preference."

While clearly interested in the presidency, Powell does not want to declare himself either a Republican or a Democrat. "Neither of the two major parties fits me comfortably in its present state," he says. Twice Powell relates conversations in which friendly acquaintances - Republican consultant Stu Spencer and Democratic activist C. Delores Tucker - advised him to run as a Democrat if he enters politics, but that is clearly not Powell's present inclination. Saying that he distrusts "rigid ideology from any direction," he states that "The time may be at hand for a third major party to emerge" to represent the "sensible center of the American political spectrum." Yet most voters, he writes, are looking "not so much for a different party but for a different spirit in the land."

Powell begins his final paragraph by quoting Thomas Jefferson: "'There is a debt of service due from every man to his country, proportioned to the bounties which nature and fortune have measured to him.' As one who has received so much from his country, I feel that debt heavily . . . My responsibility . . . is to try to give back to this country as much as it has given."

"My American Journey" leaves little doubt that Powell believes his "debt of service" is not yet fully paid. Whether as a third-party independent or as a reluctant Democrat or Republican, Colin Powell is likely to announce his presidential candidacy late this fall. And if he does, "My American Journey" signals that he will be a most formidable contender, for Powell says, "I would enter not to make a statement but to win."

GRAPHIC: *Newsday* Color Photo by David L. Pokress-Gen. Colin Powell in New York's 1991 Gulf War parade