

Biography of colin powell history essay



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Colin Powell is a man who personifies the voice of the American people and has accomplished more than anyone can imagine. He is an influential and important person in the United States of America. His drive and sheer determination have propelled him to various positions of authority. From growing up in poverty stricken areas as a child to advising presidents as an adult, he has overcome numerous hurdles in his life. His character and personality adds flavor to situations, yet only true perseverance could have led him down the road he has chosen to take. Success has never been too far out of his reach, at least in his own mind, and the sky was the limit despite uncontrollable circumstances and surroundings. Powell is a great asset to the United States and is a man among men.

Colin Powell was born on April 5, 1957 to Jamaican immigrants Luther and Arie Powell in Harlem, New York. He grew up in the same city with his Jamaican family and many relatives who were close by in adjacent neighborhoods. He was brought up with the utmost importance placed on his family. Respect for his parents was expected of him, and he was very obedient in following their wishes. His neighborhood was very ethnically diverse and a place where all races were treated the same, which instilled in him a reverence for people no matter what color they were.

He graduated from Morris High School in 1974 and began studying at the City College of New York. He joined the Reserve Officer's Training Corps and one of the fraternities inside the program, both of which would have a great affect his life. He instructed drill teams and won many top awards for their performances. He did not graduate with honors, or any kind of special academic achievements, but he excelled in the ROTC program. He joined the

United States Army as a second lieutenant due to his previous experiences in ROTC.

Powell was stationed first to Fort Benning, Georgia where he trained to become an Army Ranger. He was soon thereafter transferred to Gelnhausen, Germany to monitor the Soviet Union's border. There, he managed men and supplies, and trained his company to be ready for any conflict that might brew from the Cold War. Powell served the required two years that he was assigned to spend there and then received orders to go to Fort Devens, Massachusetts in 1960 to command another company of men (Powell).

Powell went on a blind date in 1961 with a girl named Alma Johnson while at Fort Devens. They dated, and in 1962, when he received orders for a tour in Vietnam, he asked her to marry him. She said yes, and they were married after Powell asked for leave for the wedding weekend, promising to be back on the job Monday morning. He left his newly wedded wife right before Christmas to go to Vietnam, and landed in Saigon on December 25, 1962. This would be his first experience in the midst of real war, and prove his capabilities learned in training (Powell).

When Powell arrived in Vietnam he noticed that everything looked different than what he had seen on the television. The television only showed black and white, and there was not coverage of the full carnage occurring during the war. The trees were green and the water was blue, and he would see people die around him. He was immediately briefed, and assigned to be an adviser to South Vietnamese troops. He traveled with groups mixed with South Vietnamese soldiers and canvassed areas of the jungle to find the

enemy. His patrol faced firefights and booby traps, and were ravaged by an invisible enemy that would disappear into their familiar terrain. He logged his days there, and, not long after, he was injured after falling into a North Vietnamese punji pit. These pits had sharpened bamboo sticks poisoned with feces pointing up towards the air, and were camouflaged with leaves and grass covering them. He returned to the United States to recover and avoid any further infection (Powell).

Powell returned home to his wife and to his son, who had been born while he was gone. While home, he was assigned back to Fort Benning, Georgia where he would undergo more physical training. He became eligible to attend an Officers College to acquire his Master's degree in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He moved his family there and he began taking classes in 1967. He received orders in 1968 to deploy back to Vietnam, and arrived in Duc Pho, Vietnam on July 27, 1968. In 1969, while Powell was riding in a helicopter with a two-star General and some other associates, the helicopter blades hit a tree while the pilot was trying to land and the helicopter began to fall. Powell braced for impact as the helicopter crashed to the ground, and ran out the door to then realize that there were still three more people trapped in the helicopter. He went back to pull them out, along with another soldier who had also escaped. He had received a broken ankle from the accident, yet he refused to leave and stayed with his men. He received two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star, a Soldier's Medal, and a Legion of Merit for his combined efforts in Vietnam. In 1969, with just weeks left on his tour in Vietnam, Powell was accepted to George Washington University and eventually left for the United States (Lafeber).

Powell headed home to his family and moved to Virginia to attend school at George Washington University in Washington, D. C. He finished his studies in 1971, and applied for the White House Fellowship program. He made the final cut and began work at the Office of Management and Budget under Frank Carlucci in the Pentagon, where he would learn how the internal affairs of the government were handled, which would aid him greatly during other situations in the future. He went to Korea in 1973 to take command of a battalion in South Korea as tensions grew with the North Koreans. Powell would help maintain the battalion's readiness and physical fitness. He fulfilled his task there, finished his tour, and headed home in 1974 (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/pow0bio-1>).

Powell was chosen for the National War College by five generals who had met in Washington, D. C. He was primarily selected because of his outstanding efficiency reports, which are filled out by a soldier's superior after every task or position has been completed. Powell was then selected to command over 2, 500 men in the historic 101st Airborne Division after his graduation from N. W. C. He went to Fort Campbell, Kentucky and commanded the troops for a while, but about a year later he got a call from Washington where he was being offered two jobs. He was offered to be part of the National Security Council, and a job in the Secretary of Defense's office. In the interviews, Powell learned that his Whitehouse Fellowship and experience in Vietnam had gotten the attention of his potential employers. He eventually took the job in the office of the Secretary of Defense, and moved his family there in May of 1977 (Powell).

Colin Powell acquired great experience during the times he would spend in the office of the Secretary of Defense. He said that during one experience, “ I sat there taking notes and thinking that if the National War College had been my classroom in military politics, I was now out doing fieldwork” (Powell 238). In April of 1978, his father died from liver cancer, and Colin went to visit him for the last time right before. Powell began to learn many lessons during this time about life and politics (Powell). These would be lessons he would never forget.

After a trip to Iran with Charles Duncan, Secretary of Energy, and others, Powell was asked by Charles Duncan to be his assistant. There Powell mainly assisted Duncan by managing personnel and dealing with issues within the office. Most of this was to keep the heat off of Powell’s superior and make sure that he could focus on his more important responsibilities. Powell’s superior’s positions would change, but he worked in and around the Department of Defense for years.

President Ronald Reagan was elected in 1981 after the resignation of President Richard Nixon. This new election brought changes in the Department of Defense, including personnel reduction and increases in efficiency. Powell began work under the new Deputy to the Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci, who Powell had worked for when he was a Whitehouse Fellow in 1971. He became Carlucci’s executive assistant who handled his schedule of meetings and interviews, and also helped him make some decisions. Powell didn’t mind working in an office, but he soon requested to be sent back into a commanding position. His requests were granted, and he was soon on his way to be an assistant division commander

at Fort Carson, Colorado. Just before they left, Powell's son Mike graduated from high school and went to the College of William and Mary (Powell).

Powell trained a tank unit there, yet it was not of his best experiences. He had issues with the commander there and tried to confront him. His peers attempted to discourage him from doing this, but Powell went ahead and tried to discuss training and managerial matters. The commander did not like this at all, and gave Powell a mediocre efficiency report when it was due. This was a blow to his morale, yet he was tough and pushed forward. He soon received a job offer from a White House Fellowship alumnus and took a job in Fort Leavenworth, Kentucky where he had been employed years before.

Powell's job at Leavenworth was to design a fast-acting small infantry division. He did research and work on the project and presented his finished report to Washington. While he was in Washington, he learned that he was being considered for military assistant to the Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/pow0bio-1>). Colin flew back to Washington later to meet with Weinberger and was offered the job on the spot. Powell accepted and after eleven months at Fort Leavenworth his family moved back to Washington, D. C. in 1983 (Powell).

Powell's family had been given a house by the government to live at in Fort Myers. A special telephone bank was installed there that gave him direct lines to people in the Pentagon and around Washington D. C. (Deyoung). While he worked there, he helped oversee America's small invasion of Grenada and the bombings in Libya (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/pow0bio-1>).

org/autodoc/page/pow0bio-1). General John Wickham wanted to move Powell out of the position, after his assigned two years, and into a commanding position over a mechanized unit in West Germany. Weinberger valued Powell so much that he refused to let Wickham transfer him, and the two men settled on Powell staying an extra year in return for Powell receiving a promotion to a three star general at the time of transfer (Deyoung). Powell performed his duties inside the department and was reassigned in 1986 to command 75, 000 men in the V Corps in Gelnhausen, Germany, where he had started his career (Powell).

Powell, his wife, and his youngest daughter moved to Germany, while his son was serving in another part of Germany after enlisting following his college graduation. His daughter Mary attended the College of William and Mary while the rest of the family was in Germany. Powell's men were guarding the border between the Germans and the Soviet Union. While in Germany, Washington discovered there were arms being sold to terrorists in Iran without the government's full knowledge. Powell knew about proposals to sell the arms, but he never knew at the time that sales were actually taking place. Powell was scrutinized for his involvement, but never indicted. The national security adviser resigned and the President appointed Frank Carlucci to take over the empty position. Frank called Powell to be his deputy, and Powell accepted (Powell).

Powell moved back to Washington D. C. after commanding his corps for only five months. After a year there, Carlucci was appointed to Secretary of Defense. Powell moved with him and became Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. He began to work closely with the President and all

of his associates on subjects concerning the national security. Powell became the first black man in the position, as was the same for every office he was in before (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/pow0bio-1>). In 1988, when the Presidential elections were coming up soon, there were rumors in Washington D. C. about Colin Powell running for Vice President with George Bush. The Senator of Alaska at the time even recommended this idea to Bush. Bush politely declined the idea, but did mention that Colin was, “ a class guy in every way” (Powell).

George H. W. Bush was elected to President in 1989. Powell had been recently promoted to a four star general, which is the Army’s highest rank. Bush chose his own National Security staff, but appointed Powell to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The person who holds this position is considered the highest ranking military officer in the Armed Forces. President Bush said of Powell, “ As we face the challenges of the 1990’s, it is most important that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff be a person of breadth, judgment, experience, and total integrity. Colin Powell has all those qualities and more” (<http://ezproxy.una.edu:2104/servlet/BioRC>).

As the 1990’s began, there were growing tensions in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein, the brutal ruler of Iraq at the time, invaded Kuwait out of anger towards falling oil prices. He had once been an ally to the United States during Reagan’s term, but President Bush knew a decision had to be made about how to deal with the situation. Powell advised Bush that he had an option to try to put economic and diplomatic pressures on Hussein to dissolve the conflict, but Bush thought that there was no other choice but to use military means. Powell assisted the President in a war plan, and, during <https://assignbuster.com/biography-of-colin-powell-history-essay/>

debate regarding his proposal for a large force needed, said, " After a victory, no one would argue that the force had been too big; people will say they had been prudent" (Deyoung 200). The President consented to Powell's guidance, and 550, 000 United States troops were deployed to Iraq in February 1991. After many firefights and overwhelming opposition, the Iraqis moved out of Kuwait. The war only lasted 100 hours, but the operation was successful in its mission to liberate Kuwait. This war is what is now known as the Gulf War. Powell had used his invaluable years of experience under many mentors and role models to command an entire army, and lead them to an unquestionable victory (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/pow0bio-1>).

Powell assisted Bush in his final years in office by cutting costs and managed various programs within the Army. George Clinton was officially the Democratic nominee who would run against the George W. Bush, the Republican nominee, in 1993. That year, in August, also marked Colin and Alma's thirty year anniversary. He said, " Alma and I... were richly blessed. And in the lottery of love and marriage, I knew I had been the big winner" (Powell 557). Throughout Colin's career Alma had always supported his decisions and made the best of the situations she was put in, and he was thankful for that fact daily.

George Clinton won the election in 1993 and immediately began political and military actions. Powell continued his position as Chairman and advised President Clinton as closely as he had advised Bush. The Powell decided to retire in September 1993 after serving thirty-five years in the army. Powell was not yet ready to start another career, but he started planning to write an <https://assignbuster.com/biography-of-colin-powell-history-essay/>

autobiography and give speeches. He had a rough time adjusting to civilian life, but carried onward as any good soldier would (Powell)

A year later, former President Jimmy Carter called Powell to attend delegations in the island of Haiti. Hostility had grown out of a plagued succession of dictatorships in Haiti during the early 1990's. Powell flew there with other members of the White House and employed his skill set of solving problems diplomatically. The U. S. delegates offered a peaceful solution but threatened a large invasion if the Haitian President did not step down and end their military rule of the country. Time Magazine reported that an Administration official said, " Jimmy Carter headed the delegation, but everyone knew that Colin Powell was the most important person on that plane" ([www. time. com](http://www.time.com)). With some convincing words from Powell, the Haitian president avoided conflict and submitted to the United States (595).

Powell soon found himself under pressure to run for the 1996 Presidential elections. He would have to run against Clinton, and he never truly was a Republican or a Democrat. Also, at the same time, Powell was writing a book, delivering speeches, and most of all, being the dedicated husband who he had always been. He rejected the idea after personal decisions and counsel from his peers.

Powell released his book *My American Journey* in 1995, and began traveling all over the United States to sign books. Powell also continued delivering speeches and attending political events. He kept an ongoing relationship with George Bush and many of his former co-workers. Powell also focused on his family and his personal life during the years that he spent out of office.

Bill Clinton won the election in 1996, but the election in 2000 would be very important in the life of Powell (Deyoung).

George W. Bush won the Presidential election in 2000. Bush appointed Powell to be his Secretary of State in 2001. On September 11, 2001, terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. Bush, Powell, and other advisers in the White House decided to invade Afghanistan. Powell diplomatically convinced Pakistan's leader to become an American ally, which became one of the most important allies in the conflict.

In 2002 there were reports of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD's) in Iraq. These reports were not official, and many of the sources could not be trusted. The weapons were against an agreement made previously, and there had to be something done if these reports were true. Powell was reported intelligence that could not be verified, and the administration in the White House decided to go to war against Iraq. In a later investigation in 2003, there were no WMD's found, and Powell's authority and reputation suffered heavily (Political Science Quarterly).

Bush was re-elected in 2004 and Powell resigned as Secretary of State shortly thereafter. Powell did not comment much politically after his resignation, but was reportedly in disagreement on much of what went on after the invasion of Iraq. He moved into an office in the building that the youth program he had founded, American Promise, continued operations in. Powell has grandkids and a large family to enjoy now. He is officially retired from all government work, and has moved on to other things in his life (Deyoung 520).

Colin Powell is certainly a man of character who has changed many lives, and is still influencing countless others. He is strung with strong moral fibers that have helped his rise to power in the government, and made him a role model for his children and grandchildren.