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should powell decide



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Everywhere he goes, Colin Powell is besieged. Bicycle messengers in spandex tights stop him on the streets of Washington and urge him to run for President. Waiters at restaurants advise the retired general to aim for the White House. CEOs quietly pledge money should Powell decide to run.

Political operatives of both parties would like to ignore Powell—but can't. "I don't think about it a lot," claims a senior White House official, before admitting, "If Powell does run, he will be a significant player." Another in the White House is more fatalistic: "If he runs, we're dead." Says William Lacy, Bob Dole's top strategist: "If he jumped in the race today, he would be the principal competitor for us." Everywhere he goes, Colin Powell is applauded. In the hall in San Diego where the Republican Party will nominate its presidential candidate about a year from now, the crowd is instantly on its feet as his presence is announced and he bounds down to the podium. He speaks for 50 minutes, without notes, taking the crowd through the cold war, through Korea, Vietnam, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Operation Desert Storm and the occupation of Haiti. Powell, 58, tells moving tales of his upbringing in Harlem and the South Bronx, of sitting in the Hall of St.

Catherine in the Kremlin, where he heard Gorbachev declare that the cold war was over. And when Powell has delivered his set speech, the inevitable question rises from the floor: "When are you going to announce that you're running for President?" The rapt audience carefully weighs the well-rehearsed answer, word by word. "Thank you very, very much. And I'm very, very flattered. I'm honored and humbled.

It's a question I receive regularly, and I don't know what I'm going to do with my life after my book is finished. The book is out this fall, and then I'll have to make some choices. " I tell people that I'm not a professional politician. I was truly a soldier." Another wave of applause washes over him. " Even after working two years in the West Wing, there isn't a single one of my White House friends from those days who could tell you today whether they think I'm a Republican or a Democrat.

That was part of the code I lived with. Now I'm no longer protected by my uniform. As I go around the country, I'm trying to develop a political philosophy, just to be a good citizen, not necessarily to run for office. " I want to keep the option of elective office open because I think I should do that. Why close off possibilities? I want to be of some service to the nation in the future.

I just don't know if it will be an appointed office, charitable work, educational work... " I don't find a passion for politics. I don't find that I have that calling for politics.

But I want to keep the option open ...

So the only thing I could say in answer to your question is, ' I don't know if I'll ever announce. Just watch this space. I'll be around somewhere in public life.'" Clinton, Dole and millions of American voters are watching the Colin Powell space. More than half the country says it wants an independent candidate for President to break up the duopoly enjoyed by the two parties. And in a TIME/CNN poll, nearly a third of the voters say they would vote for

Powell in a three-way race against Clinton and Dole, putting the retired general in a virtual dead heat with the candidates of the two major parties.

Moreover, the poll shows that if Powell were the Republican nominee, he would edge Clinton by a few percentage points. In the Republican field, Powell is preferred by 22 percent of G. O. P.-leaning voters, second to Dole's 43 percent and well ahead of Pat Buchanan and Phil Gramm, each of whom attract only 6 percent. If Powell were Dole's vice-presidential choice, their ticket would beat Clinton and Al Gore, while a face-off between just Clinton and Dole shows Clinton ahead.

There are four reasons why Powell could emerge as a major figure in the 1996 race: Powell himself,