

Powell and the Black Élite

by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
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Since last week, when the United States began its bombing campaign in Afghanistan, and, before that, in the wake of the September 11th attacks, one of the men in the spotlight has been the Secretary of State, Colin Powell. This profile of Powell was originally published in 1995, when he was being mentioned as a candidate for President.

General Colin Powell is a man of maxims, and one of his maxims is that you should never make a decision too early or too late. Like many of the best maxims, this one is true by definition, and is therefore of doubtful practical use. Nonetheless, timing is one of the General's grand subjects, and punctuality, which is timing writ small, is something that the General sets great store by. I arrive at his house fifteen minutes early for our appointment, even though I stopped en route to get my shoes shined. I am vague about military ways, but I suspect that neatness, too, counts. "First thing I noticed," Powell says approvingly of my gleaming brogues when we meet.

The Powells—Colin and Alma, his wife of thirty-three years—live in an expensive development in McLean, Virginia. Their house, which he bought in 1993, after his retirement, is a sprawling contemporary château, buff-colored except for white trim. In front of a three-car garage sits a light-green '68 Volvo station wagon, the upkeep of which is one of his chief hobbies. There is a flower bed, and a front lawn like an advertisement for Scotts lawn-care products; a swimming pool is tucked discreetly out back. Barberry and yew shrubs flank the portico. The generic idea is of the French country manor reinterpreted for the upscale suburban development.

"I'm now a wealthy person," Powell says matter-of-factly. "I wasn't wealthy when I retired. I mean, I just figured out what the white guys were doing." He's speaking of investment, and reinvestment—an engine of economic growth, he'll tell you. Still, the house isn't decorated ostentatiously. It looks comfortable and lived in, if with perhaps a touch of military austerity. Alma, a poised, elegant woman with a café-au-lait complexion and blue-green eyes, ushers me through a marble-floored foyer to the center hall. Off to the left is one of the General's three home offices. This one seems to be the public office—a place more for greeting visitors than for working. Its oak floor and a red leather Queen Anne chair lend the small room an air of formality. On the walls are displayed such honors as the Medal of Freedom, the Order of Jamaica, and the Eisenhower Leadership Prize Medal. There are framed photographs of a ticker-tape parade down Fifth Avenue following Desert Storm; the assembled United States High Command; Quincy Jones standing with Nelson Mandela; Alma and the General with the Reagans at a White House Christmas party. Also framed is a statement of the creed by which the military live: "We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortune, and our sacred Honor." The most striking feature of this room, however, is a vertical row of framed photographs directly in the General's line of sight as he sits in his chair: from top to bottom, they are portraits of Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. This is the company he keeps even when he is alone: the three men whom he served in an executive capacity to defend the national interest.

The second time I visit, the General shows me the full-length basement, where he maintains a mini-museum of memorabilia. The basement is also where he has another of his home offices—a less public one. Here he follows his passionate avocation, black military

history. If the office upstairs is the Fourth of July, this one is Black History Month. There is a large painting of the 10th United States Cavalry—black soldiers sent in the eighteen-seventies to battle Indians and make the West safe for white settlers. (The history and commemoration of these “Buffalo soldiers,” as they were known, has been a longtime concern of Powell’s.) Near it is a replica of a set of Civil War epaulets from the storied 54th Massachusetts Regiment, which consisted of black soldiers who were sent into battle against desperate odds.

Mounted on another wall is a gleaming sword collection, including specimens from the Coast Guard, West Point, the Merchant Marines Academy, and the Air Force. Then your eyes fall on a photograph of Ulysses S. Grant, dated June 1, 1864; a quotation from Lincoln (“I can make a Brigadier General in five minutes, but it is not easy to replace 110 horses”); and, taking pride of place here, a tinted photograph of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which used to hang in Powell’s parents’ foyer. Six Presidents keep him company as he works, along with the century-old memorabilia of blacks willing to die for a country that steadfastly refused to acknowledge their full rights as citizens. You scan the walls and you wonder: How could this man not be preoccupied with running for the Presidency?

When I was growing up, in the late fifties and early sixties, black people would say “When a Negro is President,” with all the awe and reverence of a born-again Christian saying “When Gabriel blows his trumpet and Jesus appears.” A certain millenarian intonation, combined with the speaker’s shining eyes, would force you to pause and marvel at the very idea. We knew we’d never live to see the day. “It’ll be called the Black House then,” the old joke would end. But if you are Colin Powell the prospect is no laughing matter. If you are Colin Powell, let’s agree, you have heard a small voice inside your head repeating, like a mantra, one simple thought: You could be the first black man to be President. What does that do to you? Vernon Jordan—political impresario, Clinton counsellor, Powell friend—says bluntly, “It’s got to fuck your mind up.”

Certainly the idea gives disquiet to Alma, as she makes clear on my second visit. “Soon as he would decide to run, you can bet that somebody somewhere would decide that it was his patriotic duty to shoot him,” she tells me, holding a bath towel around her shoulders to cover a blue-and-white-striped bathing suit. We’re in the marble foyer, waiting for the General to arrive. “But it is his decision,” she adds.

There are others, too, for whom it is not a soothing prospect. “He’s a phantom candidate,” the Reverend Jesse Jackson snaps when I first bring up the prospect of a Powell candidacy. “We can all have positive assumptions, but we still don’t know.” There is a surge of ire in Jackson’s voice. “We do know that very right-wing white people can trust him. They can trust him to drop bombs. We know that Reagan could trust him. Historically, there’s been this search—whites always want to create the black of their choice as our leader. So for the white people this nice, clean-cut black military guy becomes something really worth selling and promoting. But have we ever seen him on a picket line? Is he for unions? Or for civil rights? Or for anything?” Until now, Jackson has been the soul of magnanimity—or, at least, forbearance—in his public remarks about Powell. The Reverend has been so very good. For the moment, his bewilderment at what he sees as Powell’s free ride in the press has boiled over into outrage. He has been good long enough. “So you get some nice platitudes out of me,” Jackson says, evidently marvelling at the unfairness of it all. “But, I mean, what is this?”

Not a question, that, to be lightly disregarded. But, of course, we do know some things about Colin Powell. He was born in Harlem, on April 5, 1937, but grew up on Kelly Street in Hunts Point, in a South Bronx neighborhood known as Banana Kelly. His parents were both Jamaicans, who had immigrated to this country years before, and Powell owes to the complex bloodlines common among West Indians. He ticks off African, English, Irish, Scottish, Jewish, and probable Arawak Indian ancestry. It was appropriate, then, that he spent his childhood in a multi-ethnic neighborhood: the Powells' neighbors in Banana Kelly were Jewish, Irish, Polish, Italian, black, and Hispanic. Never a distinguished student, Powell did excel in his duties at the local Episcopal church, where he was an acolyte and a subdeacon. He tells me that in the ritual and the structure of the military he found "a little bit of the ritual and structure of the Episcopal Church."

That church, along with much else, is now gone. The Kelly Street of Powell's memory is as far from the Kelly Street of today as McLean is from the South Bronx. On the block of Kelly Street between Westchester Avenue and 163rd Street, near the Rafael Hernandez School, the eight-family, four-story tenement where Powell grew up has been replaced by a housing project. The ethnic mixture of the old days has been supplanted by a wave of Puerto Rican arrivals. Today, the building façades are festooned with artful graffiti, largely the work of someone who signs himself "Bio Nicer." The legends "Pepino's, P.R." and "Coquito de Puerto Rico" have been carefully lettered on the brick. The grocery store at the corner of Kelly and Westchester caters to an island palate, its bins filled with plantains and yams. It's a block where tattooed men with swollen bellies sit in folding lawn chairs or lean against buildings, drinking out of brown paper bags. The Powells don't live here anymore.

In 1956, soon after Colin Powell entered the City College of New York and its R.O.T.C. program, his father won ten thousand dollars playing the numbers and moved his family to the relative Arcadia of Elmira Avenue, in the Hollis section of Queens. Certainly that neighborhood can have changed little since the fifties. Drive from Kelly Street to Elmira Avenue today and the first thing that strikes you when you arrive is a feeling of calm and tidiness. Late-model Plymouths and Oldsmobiles and a Volvo or two fill the driveways. Only Queen Esther's Pentecostal Church and a billboard ad for Newport featuring a black man in a red-white-and-blue military uniform betray the fact that you are in a predominantly black neighborhood. The houses here are two-story red brick bungalows, distinguished from one another by different patterns of ornamental masonry. The old Powell house (the General himself sold it to the current occupants just twelve years ago) has an inset of shale and granite among the red bricks. Impatiens, hosta, forsythia, hemlock—all planted by the Powells, the woman who lives there now tells me—decorate the yard. Down the street, there are kids playing tennis. Everywhere, there are squirrels chasing squirrels. And there is quiet. Booker T. Washington, historic champion of the black working class, would have been proud.

He would also be proud of the General, whose career seems to epitomize Washington's bootstrap philosophy. And, as it happens, Powell bears an uncanny physical resemblance to the Wizard of Tuskegee. It's the same haircut, of course, but also the same sort of face—light-skinned and blunt-featured. (There are even uncanny echoes between the two men's autobiographies. Powell's boyhood account of taking a summer job mopping floors for the local Pepsi-Cola bottling plant, and doing it so skillfully that, the next summer, he was promoted to the "white" jobs, calls to mind the famous passage in "Up from Slavery" about the young Washington sweeping the floor at the Hampton Institute with such dedication that he was granted admission.) But whereas Booker T. Washington's eyes always appeared to be on the lookout for any potential black rival, Powell's face has a sort of yearbook open-

ness. You can see why people trust him and feel comfortable around him. And you can see why Powell's military career was poised at an angle of ascent from the start, when, as an undergraduate in the R.O.T.C., he achieved the rank of cadet colonel. His narrative of those years is a succession of errors made and learned from—mistakes transmuted into maxims. In time, he was happy enough to skip the mistake part.

Though it's something of a journalistic commonplace to dismiss him as a "political general," Powell can point to two tours of active duty in Vietnam, where he incurred serious injuries and from which he returned a decorated veteran. His account of the war is a devastating indictment of high-level stupidity and low-level brutality; and he is impassioned when he describes the experience of returning to a nation buffeted by race. "While I had been off fighting for the freedom of foreigners, four little black girls had been killed by a bomb planted in Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church," he recalls in his memoir. Though he heard the voices of the black-power radicals with "uneasiness," he writes that "I came to understand that a movement requires many different voices, and the tirades of the agitators were like a fire bell ringing in the night, waking up defenders of the status quo, with the message that change had better be on the way." For Powell, at least, change came swiftly: in Vietnam in 1968, the commander of the Americal Division made him operations officer.

After leaving Vietnam the following year, Powell enrolled in a graduate program at George Washington University. The once-indifferent student earned his Master of Business Administration with mostly A's. Soon he found himself in the White House Fellows Program, where he caught the notice of Caspar Weinberger and Frank Carlucci, the two men who so profoundly shaped his later career. In the meantime, he learned a thing or two about the White House bureaucracy, which meant picking up more maxims: "You don't know what you can get away with until you try." "Never get into fights with people who buy ink by the barrel." When Clifford Alexander was installed, in 1977, as Secretary of the Army—the only black man ever to hold the position—he tripled the number of black generals. "My method was simple," Alexander says. "I just told everyone that I would not sign the goddam [promotion] list unless it was fair." Among the beneficiaries of Secretary Alexander's aggressive new policy was Colin Powell, who achieved the rank of general at the age of forty-two.

In 1980, he cast his vote for Ronald Reagan; and three years later Reagan, in a manner of speaking, returned the favor. In 1983, with Weinberger ensconced as Secretary of Defense and Carlucci as his deputy, Powell was brought in from the field to be their valued point man and gatekeeper. From Reagan's Secretary of the Navy, John Lehman, came another maxim: "Power corrupts; but absolute power is really neat." When Carlucci was made Reagan's National Security Adviser, he insisted that Powell join him in revamping the National Security Council, which had been shaken up by the damaging revelations of the Iran-Contra scandal. Ten months later, on November 20, 1987, Powell himself was given the job of National Security Adviser. "If it hadn't been for Iran-Contra," he says, "I'd still be an obscure general somewhere. Retired, never heard of."

In the West Wing, Powell had the chance to refine his philosophy of action. "The key is not to make quick decisions, but to make timely decisions," he writes. "I have a timing formula, $P = 40$ to 70 , in which P stands for probability of success and the numbers indicate the percentage of information acquired. I don't act if I have only enough information to give me a less than forty percent chance of being right. And I don't wait until I have enough facts to be 100 percent sure of being right, because by then it is almost always too late." In 1989, the new Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, supported by President Bush, decided to catapult Colin Powell into the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We do not know

the algorithm by which they reached the decision, but they did not regret it. The rest is not history, yet, but something closer to “current events.”

People whose résumés read like Powell’s are sometimes liked but not respected; sometimes respected but not liked. But if you talk to Powell’s remarkably wide range of acquaintances, on and off the record, you will hear tributes that sound altogether heartfelt and unrehearsed. They say he is a “regular brother,” a “*mensch*,” “good people.” He inspires loyalty even among those who aren’t under his command. Vernon Jordan tells me of something that happened last year when he was hospitalized: “He came to see me every day. And he didn’t just, you know, breeze in and breeze out—he did some porch-sitting with me. The look on his face of worry and concern was very real. And he did not just come when I was in the hospital, he came after I got home. He is no sunshine soldier when it comes to friendship.” Warming to the subject of Powell’s family-mindedness, Jordan tells me of his own mother. She had worked as a cook in the Officers’ Club at Fort McPherson since the segregated days of the early nineteen-forties; so it was a matter of personal gratification when Powell took charge of U.S. Forces Command at the fort in 1989. Jordan describes a party that he threw that same year for his mother’s eighty-second birthday, which Colin Powell attended. He remembers Powell telling him, “This is what it is ultimately all about—family.” When Jordan adds, “And I will be there for him,” it sounds like a solemn vow. Of course, Jordan makes it clear that his partisan fealty belongs to Clinton and the Democratic Party. He’s talking not about political allegiances but about personal ones.

A theme that recurs when friends talk about Powell is that he is a “regular brother.” Jordan explains, “You do not have to hang out on the corner to be a brother. That’s No. 1. No. 2 is, you don’t ask peers whether or not a guy is a regular brother. You ask the other brothers whether he is regular or not. You ask the guys at the airport, you ask the shoeshine boy. You ask the taxicab guy. And they will tell you he is a good man.” Over the past few months, I have asked them, by the dozen, and they do tell you that. To use a word that keeps coming up, they’re proud of him. Quincy Jones, the musician and producer, and Kurt Schmoke, the black mayor of Baltimore, told me independently about going with Colin Powell to South Africa, where he sang doo-wop and Motown tunes—accompanied by a chorus of South African youth. Not only that but when I ask him to do the Camel Walk the General gets up from his chair and does his best to perform James Brown’s now classic dance. Jordan says, “The notion that he is not a regular brother is bullshit.”

As the author (with Joseph E. Persico) of “*My American Journey*,” a book whose advance orders alone guarantee it an impressive *début* on the best-seller list, Colin Powell is now courting a wider celebrity. He makes it clear that writing the book presented a dilemma: how to achieve candor without the appearance of disloyalty. He has, by and large, brought it off. Though he describes Weinberger’s “little quirks,” his “Captain Queeg talisman,” his “taste for pomp”—and though he seems, in the end, to be more comfortable with the policy perspectives of Weinberger’s foe, George P. Shultz—the account of his great mentor is unmistakably admiring. He rates Bush highly as a commander, but he found his demeanor toward the end of his Presidency so baffling as to invite a medical explanation. (Powell says, “The President calling someone a bozo? You can’t do that. But the only way I could see writing it—because I’m not a medical expert—was to pose it as a rhetorical question.”) And while his portrayal of President Reagan is clearly of someone who is worryingly out of touch, it is imbued with almost filial affection. “I had trouble with the Reagan chapters,” he explains, “because I have a loving relationship with him and had to be honest without being hurtful.”

He also acknowledges another kind of discomfort presented by his involvement with the Reagan and Bush Administrations. "When I was a young lieutenant I would have commanders come up to me and say, 'Powell, you're doing great—God damn, you're the best black lieutenant I've ever seen,'" Powell recalls. "And I'd say, 'Thank you.' Just file it away." It was good practice for his years in the White House as far as racial politics were concerned. "The problem with Reagan and Bush and Weinberger and their ilk is that they just never knew," Powell says, almost wistfully. "They were never sensitized to it. They never had to live with it. They were never close to it. And the cold political calculus is that the Republicans said, 'We can't get these people, so why spend a dime trying?' Even though Reagan and Bush are two of the closest people in my life, I've got to say that this was an area where I found them wanting. This was a difficult thing to write about in the book." He removes his photograph of Reagan from the wall and shows it to me. On it Reagan had written, in his neat, round cursive hand, "If you say so, Colin, it must be right." Powell says, "Just read it—this is from the President of the United States. And so now I'm going to turn around and say he's a racist?"

Powell tells me of an episode when Carlucci, as Reagan's National Security Adviser, sent him to see Senator Jesse Helms about a policy matter, and Helms later mentioned to Carlucci that he'd "listened to that black general you sent up here." Powell glosses, "See, now, Jesse just don't know any other way to see folks. As cordial as Jesse and I are now—and we will go out on yachts together, we'll say nice things to each other—if you think Jesse can ever see me as anything other than a black general . . ." Powell shakes his head. "Then we'd have arrived. But we ain't arrived."

The most famous black President of this century is one Douglass Dilman: he is the hero of "The Man," a 1964 best-selling novel by Irving Wallace, which was later made into a movie starring James Earl Jones. Thrust into the Oval Office after a crisis of succession, President Dilman swiftly finds himself the target of popular animosity and Beltway intrigue. He's a man of conscience and competence, but humiliation awaits him at every turn. Half the people he invites to his first big state dinner fail to show. More nefariously, he is ensnared in a trumped-up sex scandal. His enemies seize the opportunity to begin impeachment hearings, and the Southern senator in charge of them tells him gravely, "I must decide . . . whether you acted wisely or unwisely as a President, and whether you acted as an American President or as a Negro President."

An American President or a Negro President? Though the question doesn't pose itself so starkly these days, it hasn't altogether disappeared. Powell, for one, has made his own decision on the matter. "I really don't want to be elected to be the first black American President," he tells me. "I don't want to be the poster child for the brothers, or for guilty white liberals. That would not be true to the image I have of myself."

Nor would it be true to the image that others have of him. His mentor Caspar Weinberger tells me that he doesn't see a black man when he sees Powell. "Quite a few people have talked to me recently about whether America's ready to accept a black candidate," he says. "I don't think that would be a factor at all if he should enter the Presidential race. There are probably a few people left who would still be troubled by it, but I think it could be far less than one per cent. The fact of the matter is that with Colin I never think of whether he's black or white or anything else."

Vernon Jordan, as a longtime veteran of the civil-rights movement, resists Weinberger's

formulation. "Any time a white person says they do not see Colin Powell as black, that tells me that they cannot see," he says wearily. "What they are really saying is 'We see that he is black but we are prepared to look beyond that.'" Earl Graves, the black businessman and publisher of the magazine *Black Enterprise*, is more acerbic on the subject: "It's an affront to me when you say that, because that means that if you saw him as a black person you couldn't vote for him."

Still, there are black activists and intellectuals who wonder if the key to Powell's success may be that he is, in a phrase of the black writer Jill Nelson's, "the un-Negro." Julian Bond, the black civil-rights activist and former Georgia state legislator whose name was among those proposed for the Vice-Presidential nomination at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, develops this point: "I think first his uniform—braid, the medals—insulated him from race. Now it's in his carriage, his manner: even when he's out of uniform, even when he's in a blue serge suit, he's in uniform. You put Colin Powell and any other Mr. Black Man up there, and it becomes just that—it's Colin Powell and Mr. Black Man." Then there's the voice. "Probably because of his island heritage, he has a kind of diction that isn't black American. He's verbally not black." His podium style follows suit, Bond says. "It's just straight-ahead talking. It's almost Reaganesque—there's a kind of formal intimacy, a sense that he's speaking directly to you. There's none of that call-and-response, none of that 'Can I have just a minute more?' preacher stuff."

The racial iconography of Colin Powell goes beyond style to substance, according to the black political scientist Ronald Walters, who was Jesse Jackson's deputy campaign manager in 1984. "He doesn't speak in a racial language and therefore he's not threatening to whites," Walters says. "Right now we're having a discussion about racial mobility in American society—about things like civil rights and affirmative action. But underneath is the anger of many whites who believe that if blacks would only buckle down and play by the rules they could make it. And Powell then becomes a symbol of that—the whites' answer to the angry blacks who say racism is still here. That makes him part of this discussion, even though he hasn't engaged in it." Jesse Jackson—who eloquently indicts the supposed ideal of "color blindness" as an alibi for turning a blind eye to the social inequities of race—offers something more aphoristic. "It's not so much a problem that Weinberger says he doesn't see a black man when he sees Powell—and he does. It's important that Powell sees a black man when he shaves, and he does."

Ask Powell about the way he has come to be seen as a paragon of something like racial erasure, and it's clear that he has given the matter some thought. "One, I don't shove it in their face, you know?" he says. "I don't bring any stereotypes or threatening visage to their presence. Some black people do. Two, I can overcome any stereotypes or reservations they have, because I perform well. Third thing is, I ain't that black." He talks about interracial social skills, skills that he fears are deficient in too many blacks. "I speak reasonably well, like a white person," he says. "I am very comfortable in a white social situation, and I don't go off in a corner. My features are clearly black, and I've never denied what I am. It fits into their general social setting, so they do not find me threatening." He pauses. "I think there's more to it than that, but I don't know what it is."

According to Bruce Llewellyn, a cousin and business partner of Powell's—and an entrepreneur whom Powell proudly describes as "one of the country's wealthiest African-Americans"—Powell's "nonthreatening" personality helps. "Have you ever heard his speeches?" Llewellyn, a formidable grizzly bear of a man, wants to know. "He gives a great speech. He gets all them white people coming up off the chairs, clapping and feeling good about them-

selves. He talks about America, the great land of opportunity, and how a poor West Indian kid with Jamaican parents and living in the South Bronx can work his way to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

"An all-American story," I put in.

"They all love this shit," he says, with a characteristic mixture of candor and acumen. "They all love the idea that 'Gee, we weren't prejudiced. A good man came, and we gave him his shot.' White people love to believe they're fair. One of the things that upsets the living shit out of them is when you confront them with the fact that they are really a bunch of racist, no-good motherfuckers." Llewellyn contrasts Powell's wholesome appeal with what he takes to be Jesse Jackson's forte—inspiring fear. "Jesse scares white people, because he really sounds like a fiery zealot, like he might just jump up and say 'Fuck you!' and hit you in the mouth. They really are afraid that Jesse can create violence, make people want to attack you with a baseball bat, or whatever. He missed his calling. What Jesse should be is our business shakedown artist." Llewellyn's tone is not unadmiring; he means this as a constructive suggestion. Though he is a former member of the Carter Administration, he has little patience for the pieties of public discourse. This is a man who is accustomed to being in charge of his own affairs and to speaking his own mind. Later, I mention to the General something that Llewellyn had said, and he interjects, in a tone of exaggerated annoyance, "Goddam Bruce—I told him to shut up." He explains, with mock gruffness, "I put him in a closet, because he was talking to everybody."

Still, Llewellyn is far from alone in seeing the contrasts between Powell and Jackson as not only instructive but emblematic. Representative Ron Dellums told Powell that, compared to Jesse Jackson, he was a "jelly maker, not a tree shaker." It's an analysis from which Powell, who speaks of Jackson with more amusement than animosity, does not exactly demur. In the words of one member of the Powell camp, "Jesse has a horrible problem. I mean, he is no longer the No. 1 Negro in this country."

The offices of the National Rainbow Coalition, in Washington, D.C., are modestly appointed but ample in size. My appointment with Jackson is at five o'clock; not unexpectedly, Jackson is running late, by about a half hour. The office I wait in is crowded with stacks of old newspapers, a copier, and a large paper shredder that bears a sign reading "Ollie and Fawn." Over the past several weeks, I've brought up Powell with almost every black person I've spoken to. Jackson's press secretary at the Coalition, Theresa Caldwell, turns out to be effusive on the subject: "He's every-black-person-looking. In fact, without the uniform he looks like my cousin Bobby. He's the best of us in a lot of ways."

Jackson, who, at fifty-three, is five years Powell's junior, is more restrained and statesman-like today than he was when we spoke earlier. Still, the figure recently erected by the news-weekly pundits—Powell, political panacea—has clearly been on his mind of late. "The fact is that a black is capable of being a conduit for racist positions," he tells me. "But skin color becomes a fig leaf, so if a black is elected on that premise, and you've chosen ethnicity over ethics, that's a big mistake."

Watching him light into the topic reminds you that the tradition of African-American leadership has tended to divide into contrasting couples: there's an Esau for every Jacob. The elegant ex-slave Frederick Douglass faced the militant-nationalist Henry Highland Garnet, the radical W. E. B. Du Bois faced the mainstream power broker Booker T. Washington, and the

integrationist Martin Luther King, Jr., faced the separatist Malcolm X. But never before have two such rivals played out their fraternal drama in the arena of American electoral politics.

With all the obviousness of a stage set, their offices telegraph their differences. On Jackson's walls hang his heroes—Aristide, Mandela, and, of course, Dr. King. And then there is the matter of style, both personal and public. Powell quotes Michael Korda and Clausewitz; Jackson quotes the Bible. Powell's origins are urban; Jackson's are rural. Powell talks like a schoolmaster; Jackson talks like the Holy Ghost. Indeed, Jackson's voice is black from the first syllable, and his cadences are those of a long black preacherly tradition. Powell, as he himself says, speaks "like a white person." "When Jesse walks into a room, white people hear some sad-eyed Negro spiritual," one black politician told me. "When Powell walks in, they hear 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and 'God Bless America.'" Only their participation in the theatre of Presidential politics unites the two. But it divides them as well. Jackson sought to be the first black President. Powell would like to be the first President who happens to be black.

To take the measure of what Powell represents to Jackson, you have to look again at what Jackson himself represented to American politics. I remember newspaper accounts published the day after Jesse Jackson's setback in the 1988 Wisconsin primary. The gist was that, to judge by surveys, a majority of white voters went to sleep declaring that they would vote for a black man to be President but woke up realizing that they couldn't bring themselves to do it. Yet those who thought the Jackson campaign had failed missed what was really going on. Jackson's masterstroke was his use of the Democratic primaries—and his accompanying push for voter registration—as a referendum within the African-American community about who would inherit King's mantle. Never mind the delegate count: in 1988, Jesse Jackson was elected President of black America. His term has not lasted as long as he might have liked. Analyzing Jackson's relation to Powell, Vernon Jordan says, "It is probably the same way George Bush felt in 1992. There is no right guaranteeing a position of leadership, an opportunity to run for office or to lead an organization, that somebody holds forever." He adds delicately, "But that does not keep people from feeling that way."

There is, surely, another fundamental difference between the two men. Jesse Jackson's Presidential race was, in essence, the courting of a symbol, and, as such, is representative of a movement where symbolism has long been in the ascendancy. I don't think that Jackson ever truly imagined himself in the Oval Office, except as a visitor. But few doubt that Colin Powell has. Powell—invariably tagged with the journalistic cliché "consummate insider"—has had the opportunity to witness at first hand the executive styles of Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton; and if the job evaluations he has provided of his three bosses are far from dismissive, they are decidedly not overawed. He recounts their processes of decision-making in the spirit of one who means to learn from their mistakes. To Powell, whose responsibilities have ranged from planning wars to devising the first systematic reduction in the size of the military since the Second World War, the White House is an extension of a system of levers and pulleys he has helped design. No other black American has been such an integral part of the structures and processes of power.

Jackson, seated at his desk, cufflinks gleaming in the afternoon sun, offers his own analysis of how he and Powell differ. Powell represents the dominant culture, he believes, while he himself represents an oppositional culture; Powell has been "pushed along by a tailwind," as he puts it, while he has been "facing a headwind." Powell is "flowing with the culture," he says, whereas "so much of my work, so much of Dr. King's work, is countercultural." Jackson warms to his subject: "And those who go with the counterculture either die early or live

on, despised. If you preach against sexism, against racism, against worker exploitation, you're going with the counterculture, and who is it you're going up against except the publishers, the bankers, the image-makers, the military, the government? Now, there is always a tendency of this society to try to position people they feel comfortable with, and what's amazing about Powell is he's created a comfort zone among the guardians of the culture. How long the right wing would express admiration if he took principled positions to their logical conclusion no one knows. But we do know that the same group that said to Jesus 'Hosanna, Hosanna' not long after that was saying 'Crucify him, crucify him.' And the same thing is already starting to happen to Powell."

"Would it surprise you to know that Powell once thought about becoming an Episcopal priest?" I ask. I'm thinking of Powell's remarks about the similarities between the two institutions.

"No," Jackson says. "Would it surprise you to know that if I hadn't won my scholarship I was going to join the Air Force?" But Jackson has taken the path that Powell passed by. Right now he is riffing through his Bible. Earlier, a black politician said to me, "It's very peculiar: Jackson feels that Powell has somehow taken something from him." Try a birthright. It is not the story of Jacob and Esau that is today's text, however, but the story of Daniel, Mishael, and Azariah. "It's really very basic," Jackson says, and begins reading from the Book of Daniel: " 'In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it.' And the king ordered Ashpenaz as chief of his court officials to bring him some of the Israelites—the invaded people, the ghetto people—from the leadership class: young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and culture of the Babylonians."

I'm beginning to get the picture: an élite siphoned off and coöpted by the ruling culture. Jackson goes on, "The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from his table. They were to be trained for three years and after that they were to enter the king's service." He looks up and says, "In other words, take them away from their culture, send them to Harvard, send them to Yale, send them to the military." Then he reads again: " 'Now among these were the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat.' " Jackson explains, "Daniel resolved not to defile himself—he went counterculture, and so forth. What I'm talking about is this way of taking people from their culture, getting a certain select group—get Gates, get Powell, get Cornel West, get whomever. Get . . ."

"Jesse," I propose.

He is having none of it. "But Jesse, like Daniel, purposed not to defile himself," he says, and he gives me a stern look. "By now, I could be on all kinds of boards. But I choose to transform the culture, not to conform to it." The Reverend returns to the Good Book. "The big social issue here to me is not the three boys passing the religious test and God coming and rescuing them in some miraculous way. The big issue is: What about the rest of them? What about those who were never chosen in the first place?"

To forge a career as a military man is not to be defiled, exactly; rather, it is to reject the vocabulary of defilement. And the military is more than Powell's day job. It is an integral part of his identity. His military career has created a circle of loyalists, and the odd detrac-

tor. Surprisingly, Clifford Alexander, whose term as Secretary of the Army makes him as responsible as anyone for Powell's career trajectory, seems less than pleased with the result: "Was Colin Powell exceptional? No. There were a number of black generals who were equally as good as Colin Powell. But the breaks were with Powell. By working in the Pentagon, he was visible to the Republican leadership. And Colin, who is smart and competent, did quite well, in part because of the proximity." In Alexander's view, Powell "is now in the hands of the handlers." He tries to take the long view. Echoing Jackson, he says, "You see, this has been pulled on us many times. White America says, 'This is your new leader, and you ought to feel good about it.'" It appears that Alexander does not feel good about it.

Then, too, both Powell's record as a commander and his views on military engagement have been controversial. Two books, "The Commanders," by Bob Woodward, and "The Generals' War," by General Bernard E. Trainor and Michael R. Gordon, chiselled away at Powell's reputation as the helmsman of the Gulf War. The first depicted him as a reluctant warrior, who cautioned against military intervention until the die was finally cast. The second took him to task for pursuing what its authors considered a faulty endgame to the conflict—one that left Saddam Hussein's regime and military might essentially intact and able to threaten future belligerence. Both accounts have been disputed, by Powell and others. What has greater currency, however, is the unapologetic stand he has taken against intervention in the Bosnian crisis.

"The biggest mistake was recognizing all these little countries when they started to decide they were independent," Powell says, leaning back in his chair. "The Serbs had very good reason to be worried about being in a Muslim-dominated country. It wasn't just paranoia. When the fighting broke out, should the West have intervened militarily as one of the belligerents to put down all other belligerents? There was no Western leader who was willing to say, 'I have a vital interest in the outcome of this conflict.' Nobody really thinks it has a vital interest." What has become known as the Powell Doctrine cautions against military involvement where political objectives remain murky. Now, three weeks into the current allied air campaign, Powell says, "I'm pleased there is some progress. But we could have gotten these terms three years ago—in fact, we could have gotten better terms."

So Powell is wary of overseas commitments and sees nothing in Bosnia to tempt him to change course. "Bismarck once said that all the Balkans were not worth the life of one Pomeranian grenadier," Powell said when we talked in July. "The man knew what he was talking about. Disraeli said something similar." The national animadversions of nineteenth-century statesmen aside, Powell also has serious tactical misgivings. Speaking a few weeks before the allied air strikes began, Powell made clear his skepticism of the ultimate efficacy of such efforts. "We can bomb—but what will we accomplish? Tito spent forty years building this military infrastructure so that it couldn't be bombed by the Red Air Force. This stuff is underground. Take out the artillery? This isn't like Desert Storm. You have hills, you have trees. You have a civilian population, you have churches, you have homes, you have schools, and they can park all that artillery right next to any of that stuff, and you can't bomb it. As a culture, the Air Force tends to say we can do all kinds of wonderful things. But not to a dispersed enemy in wooded, hilly terrain which has the ability to shoot back. We bombed the hell out of Vietnam and never did stop anything on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Bush understood that. But we've now said, 'No, we're going to bomb,' and what are the reasons? NATO credibility? You don't bomb people for credibility. We have repeatedly gotten in trouble thinking that the use of military force is for the purpose of being seen as having done something. You should use military force for achieving a specific military purpose that is linked to the achievement of a specific political purpose and goal." This conclusion is a

fairly precise statement of the Powell Doctrine—a “doctrine” being what happens to a maxim when it serves as the basis of military policy.

We’re on opposite sides of the issue, and, needless to say, he has heard my arguments many times before. But still: even beyond the enormities in view, what about the precedent we’re setting for the next century—the implicit license our inaction confers on other attempts at “ethnic cleansing”? What kind of signals are we sending?

“I think you ought to send a clear signal: that we’re not going to get involved in this war, and it’s not going to end until people are tired of fighting one another. If you say that every day, the Muslims will know it and the Serbs will know it, and there will be no confusion. But for three years we’ve been giving these mixed signals so the signals are worthless, and therefore we are weakened and cheapened in the eyes of the world. We have a very bad reputation around the world now as an incontinent political entity. And it’s hurt the President badly and it’s hurt his statesmanship really badly. But what are the long-term consequences? I really don’t think the people in places like Azerbaijan or Armenia or Liberia or Sierra Leone are calibrating their actions on the basis of what we do in Bosnia.” He gives me a wry look when he says, “There are some people at that school you hang out at”—he means Harvard, where I teach—“who contribute nothing else to the national G.D.P. except to create these great schemes.” Powell worries that there are certain essentials that get lost in the ozone of theory. “I believe in the bully’s way of going to war,” he says. “ ‘I’m on the street corner, I got my gun, I got my blade, I’m a kick yo’ ass.’ ” He adds, “There was a paragraph like this in the early draft of the book, but it sounded a little too, shall we say, ‘ethnic,’ and a little too Bronx, so I took it out.”

Annoying as he finds the Ivy League technocrats on this issue, Powell has even less time for some of my co-religionists in the press. “William Safire and Tony Lewis say this will only take a little bit of bombing and it will work. No historical precedent exists for such a position. And Safire drives me to distraction. Sometimes, because he starts down this logic trail, and every time he gets trapped he just says, ‘Air power can do it.’ Forget it. The technology isn’t that good. Safire’s outrageous: ‘There’s no doubt in anyone’s mind that if we’d done this three years ago . . .’ Bullshit, Bill. But he does that. He’s getting increasingly arrogant in his old age.” Still, you wonder if in allowing a maxim to become a doctrine Powell hasn’t courted a paradox—that of raising pragmatism to a principle. Extremism in pursuit of moderation may be no virtue.

But Powell has a redoubtable gift for charming his opponents, even on deeply felt concerns. At the Harvard commencement two years ago, I saw this gift in action. Long before the issue of gays in the military surfaced to electoral consciousness, Powell had been selected to receive an honorary degree and to give a commencement address; but the eventual salience of the debate, and Powell’s well-known opposition to lifting the ban, made his appearance a matter of heated controversy on campus. The mayor of Cambridge, Kenneth Reeves, recalls introducing himself to Powell earlier in his visit. “I said, ‘General Powell, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to Cambridge. I am the mayor of Cambridge, and in Cambridge the mayor happens to be both black and a homosexual, and this homosexual is going to keep you safe all day long.’ ” He laughs. “The secret to Colin Powell, I found, is that he is disarmingly charming.”

Just before the General was to speak before a wary crowd of twenty thousand, the graduate students’ speaker delivered an impassioned and eloquent attack on his position and was loudly applauded for it. How would Powell respond? As the student was returning to her

seat, Powell rose, walked over to her, and shook her hand, thanking her for her comments. A Cambridge crowd—inconceivably remote from the military ethos—cheered him, won over by the graciousness of his gesture. When we discussed the matter recently, Powell cautioned, “I never presented the case in terms of there being something wrong, morally, or any other way, with gays. I just couldn’t figure out a way to handle the privacy aspect.” And I can’t figure out what those privacy aspects are in the first place. What’s plain is that the “don’t ask, don’t tell” compromise receives his imprimatur in part because it is a compromise, and Powell is a man who believes in the golden middle.

Not surprisingly, when I ask him to contrast the military-decision-making styles of the three Presidents he advised—Reagan, Bush, and Clinton—he tells me that Bush “had the clearest sense of how to marry political objectives and military force.” He tells a story about a small naval skirmish with Iranians that broke out in the Persian Gulf when he was Reagan’s National Security Adviser. Reagan’s approval was needed to widen the rules of engagement, and when Powell went to him with the request he found the President sitting at his desk signing photographs of himself. “Within a nanosecond after I got out the last phrase of my request to him, he said, ‘Yes, do it, give ‘em hell,’ ” Powell recalls. It was, he says, “vintage Reagan.” Clinton, he guesses, “would have talked about it a lot more and would have been, minute by minute, into the details.” As for Bush, he “was somewhere in between.” Bush and his advisers would have asked a few questions about the whys and wherefores, but “we would have gotten the same quick answer,” Powell says. “With Clinton, I suspect it might have taken a little bit longer.”

To the chagrin of many Powell-for-President enthusiasts, Powell’s own decision-making process has been displaying more deliberateness than speed this year. How, for that matter, would the maxims of a lifetime in the military translate into the political arena? Timing, readiness, the calculation of odds: these things enter equally into military and political campaigns. But the political arena presents questions that do not arise in the armed forces. To begin with, a military commander seldom has to decide whose side he will join. Powell, though a registered independent, came of age politically in Republican Administrations and cast votes for Reagan and Bush. “If I were to decide to enter politics and run for the Presidency,” he told Barbara Walters, “the easiest way to do it, I think, would be as a Republican. It would probably be more of an issue of me making compromises than it would be for the Republican Party making compromises, if we’re talking about 1995-96.”

Will he make those compromises? Certainly Powell’s relations with the black political establishment, such as it is, have sometimes been strained. He is sensitive to the hazards of criticizing black leadership (“They will jump in your face in a minute”) but is undeterred by them. He views the left-listing congressional Black Caucus as a phenomenon of resegregation; it’s collectively in thrall to “the redistricting of these little squirrely black districts all over,” he says. “That gives us more black congressmen, but with less power and less influence.” Nor, by his reckoning, have they been eager to take responsibility for risky policies they’ve helped to initiate.

The Black Caucus has often sought to make American policy more sensitive to Third World concerns; racial solidarity is meant to extend beyond national boundaries. And Powell himself is not immune to the mystique of origins. He has spoken of his first visit to West Africa as a profoundly moving experience—one that reinforced his sense of an ancestral identity. “I am an African, too,” he has declared. Still, his attitude toward African nations does not exactly brim with sentimentality. “We have nations in Africa that are going backward in

time hundreds of years," he asserts. "They are abandoning their colonial heritage, which was sort of the passage into the twentieth century." General Abacha, the despotic ruler of Nigeria, incurs sharp disapproval—"He has the worst C.I.A. bio I've ever read, and I've read lots of them"—but then so do his subjects: "Nigeria is a nation of ninety million people. With enormous wealth. And what they could have done with that wealth over the last twenty years—they just pissed it away. They just tend not to be honest. Nigerians as a group, frankly, are marvellous scammers. I mean, it is in their national culture." So the General, to say the least, cannot be accused of knee-jerk Afrocentrism.

And yet Powell's fit with the Reagan revolution was clearly imperfect. On the one hand, he was grateful for its invigorating effect on the military, which he felt had been undervalued by Carter. On the other hand, Powell is someone for whom the adjective "right-wing" is not a positive designation; someone for whom the adjective "middle-of-the-road" is no pejorative. And though most of his political friends are Republicans, many are not. Representative Kweisi Mfume, the outspoken former leader of the congressional Black Caucus, might be expected to provide a voice of dissent, but he turns out to be an ardent booster. "General Powell is the best that we can be," he says. Would he support him? "I was at his house a week ago and I told him that whenever he decided, please count me among the persons he would call first," Representative Mfume replies. "We shook on it. That says it all."

Certainly the issue of affirmative action seems to be something of a wedge between Powell and many of his Republican friends. When he's in a formal mood, he carefully distinguishes between quotas and "equal opportunity," and discourses upon the wrongful conflation of the two. But he can also bring a certain fervor to the topic. "It's amazing how affirmative action has suddenly become Issue No. 1. One of my Republican friends had the nerve to send me one of their newsletters a few weeks ago saying that we had to get rid of affirmative action because we couldn't keep putting these programs in place for allegations of 'vague and ancient wrongs.' I almost went crazy. I said, Vague? Vague? Denny's wouldn't serve four black Secret Service agents guarding the President of the United States. The Chicago Federal Reserve Bank just told us something that any black could have told you—that it's harder to get a loan if you're black than if you're white. And we got Pete Wilson out there saying that affirmative action is bad because there are eight-tenths of one per cent more black students in the University of California school system as a result of fifteen years of affirmative action. This is the worst problem the country has? And I said, 'If there is a program that is a "get over" program, then get rid of it, sure.' But don't throw out the baby with the bath-water."

I mention the F.C.C. program granting minority set-asides of television and radio stations. He's intimately acquainted with it: it enabled him, in partnership with Bruce Llewellyn and others, to acquire a Buffalo television station ten years ago. "But it's black-owned," he says. "If you got a bunch of white guys with a brother fronting for them, get rid of it. That doesn't serve any purpose for us. What is troubling now is that we have essentially said that the principle of lowering bootstraps for people to climb up is bad." And he speaks about having been told by the Reagan adviser Stuart Spencer, who is one of the inventors of the political-consultancy business, that he was too socially conscious to mesh with the current Republican agenda.

The figure of Powell, it should be said, elicits surprising warmth among many blacks whose relation to the political establishment has often been more adversarial than not. Marian Wright Edelman, the left-liberal head of the Children's Defense Fund and herself a best-selling author, recalls, "The first time I heard him speak at the Council on Foreign Relations,

he was so effective that I had to force myself to remember that we disagree on certain military policies. He certainly has a central core of integrity." Another prominent advocate, Hugh Price, who is president of the National Urban League, is sure that "if Powell is elected, he will be elected because the Americans are hungry for a person who stitches the country back together again—who brings a sense of decency, coupled with a sense of resolve and toughness." Invoking Powell's military background, the black philosopher and social critic Cornel West says, "If he could push through a Marshall Plan for the cities, that would be extraordinary. My hunch is that it would be very difficult to do, but he might be open to it. I have my own critique of the military establishment, but I think he is a man of compassion in his own way."

When I asked Roger Wilkins, the liberal commentator and an *éminence grise* of black politics, whether he would support Powell for President, he didn't have to pause to reflect. "Oh, yeah," he said. Even if Powell ran as a Republican? "Oh, yeah." As a third-party candidate? He grinned. "Third party? Not only would I support him, I'd work my ass off for him." And he voices a widespread grievance when he adds, "Black people are stuck in nowhere's land. Republicans don't want us. And the Democrats take us for granted."

Most of Powell's advisers take a dim view of an independent candidacy. Independent candidates for the White House do not have an inspiring record of success; the electoral college is designed in part to stabilize a two-party system. Ross Perot, several people have reminded me, spent sixty million dollars out of pocket and received not a single electoral vote. "If he had two hundred million dollars put at his disposal, he'd consider it," one friend of the General's insists. "And he may well get it." If you measure the legacy of the most successful independent candidates by sound bites rather than by electoral returns, they do have something to show for their efforts. George Wallace ("pointy-headed intellectuals"), John Anderson ("I'm a social liberal and a fiscal conservative"), and Ross Perot ("giant sucking sound") have all made contributions to the national conversation. So the General's lifelong predilection for the quotable may prove a valuable resource if he decides to hit the campaign trail.

Of course, character—solidity, strength, effectiveness—will be his main selling point. No one thinks that what will distinguish Powell is the split-the-difference approach toward policy matters which he shares with John Anderson. We know where Powell stands on many "hot button" issues, like abortion (he's pro-choice), the death penalty (he supports it), gun control (he'll support mild measures, involving registration or waiting periods), school prayer (he's opposed, but he doesn't mind a moment of silence).

Still, analysts often fail to acknowledge the extent to which elections are character-driven rather than issue driven. Many things were portended by an electorate that switched its support from Carter to Reagan in just four years, but a massive ideological conversion was not one of them. And Powell has mastered the Rorschachian rhetoric of the well-groomed political candidate. His speeches are more evocative than substantive—short on red meat and long on uplift. Like Whitney Houston, he believes the children are our future—teach them well. "You've got to start with the families," he says of the crisis in the inner cities, "and then you've got to fix education so these little bright-eyed five-year-olds, who are innocent as the day is long and who know right from wrong, have all the education they need. And you have to do both these things simultaneously. It's like being able to support two military conflicts simultaneously." Military metaphors, the worn currency of political discourse in this country, take on a certain vitality when he deploys them. (Indeed, there are those who argue that much of the General's allure stems from a sort of transposition of

realms. "I think people are hungry for a military solution to inner-city problems," the black law professor and activist Patricia Williams says.)

"You know, I'm sort of a liberal guy, up to this point," Powell goes on, "but here's where I become a Republican: once these kids come out of school, there has got to be a capitalistic entrepreneurial system that is just burning up the place to create the jobs for these kids. And therefore you've got to get the tax burden off business. You've got to lower the capital-gains tax." Capital gains are not an abstract matter to Powell. "What have I done with my wealth? I bought my wife a nice house, I bought two new suits, leased a new car. What have I done with the rest of it? Invested it. Some of it is in bonds. Where's that bond money going? It's building things—cities. Some of it is in the equity market. What's it doing? It's financing companies. It's looking for more places to create wealth, and guess what happens when that happens. Jobs are going to be created. And so the government's got to get off people's backs. They've got to have minimum regulations, for safety and for some level of security, so we're not plundering things. But after that, get off their backs." Everything clear? Sort of a liberal, kind of a conservative. Clearly black, but, as he explains, not too black.

Conjecture has a way of feeding on itself: how realistic is any of this Powell-for-President stuff? Bruce Llewellyn, for one, suspects that we have got ahead of ourselves. Will his cousin run? "No. Because he can't win. He can't get the Democratic nomination, he's not going to get the Republican nomination, and nobody can win as an independent. Second, the Republican Party is in the hands of the conservatives, the right-wing zealots, the religious zealots, and they're not about to give him the nomination. I think it's very interesting. Everybody loves Colin Powell, but that's because nobody knows what he stands for." What we've overlooked, Llewellyn goes on to say, is another, non-electoral angle: "The game that's being played right now has to do with selling books. Because nobody knows who he is—this will be the first 'insight' from his own lips. All he needs to do is not take himself out of the race for the Presidency, and keep everybody so entranced and intrigued by it all that they want to know more." And buy a zillion books. "After all," Llewellyn says, "this book is going to sell for about twenty-five bucks a copy."

If you think that Powell's ambitions are less circumscribed than that, however, everything is a matter of the calculation of odds. The polling data are encouraging—at least, to a point. Opinion surveys show Powell, running as a Republican, beating Clinton. The numbers are less rosy when he runs as an independent alongside Dole and Clinton: then Dole and Clinton each get about a third of the vote, and Powell gets only a fifth. A recent U.S. News poll showed Powell receiving favorable ratings from seventy-three per cent of whites but only from fifty-seven per cent of blacks. To many of them, Powell may be more of a name than a face: almost a fifth of those African-Americans who said they knew of Powell reported that they didn't know what race he was. This will almost certainly change in the upcoming weeks.

There are other factors to consider. The political scientist Ron Walters has argued, "In the black community, Powell's poll numbers are much lower because he has to confront the greater familiarity and proven fidelity of Jesse Jackson, who is rated much higher there but lower than Powell among whites." What makes things especially tricky for the Powell pollster is the well-established distortive effect of race on polling data—many black candidates who soar in opinion surveys get sunk in the voting booth. Powell says, "Every time I see Earl Grave, he says, 'Look, man, don't let them hand you no crap. When they go in that

booth, they ain't going to vote for you.' " Or as Walters explains, "When you do a public-opinion poll, what happens is that whites, particularly, lie. They don't answer the polls the way they're going to vote. So right now you have to discount some of Powell's support because of race."

All number-crunching aside, it is hard to discount a sense of hopefulness and enthusiasm, which you often encounter in unexpected places. Powell, who has accumulated a store of anecdotes from people who have been urging him to run, tells of a four-star admiral who took a ride with a white taxi-driver. The driver launched into a monologue about how terrible black folks were, but then brightened when he found out whom the admiral worked for. "General Powell? Shoot, if he runs he'd have a thousand taxi-drivers voting for him." But Powell cautions, "The question is whether this is just popularity or political power. There's a difference."

Well, sure. But maybe not such a big one. He talks about friends who watched his television appearance after he, Senator Sam Nunn, and Jimmy Carter had prepared the way for a peaceful occupation of Haiti. "Some of my friends and advisers checked back with reporters. And one of the reports that came back to me was 'Well, you know, we were anxious to see Colin again, because this was the first time we'd ever seen him without that suit of lights, without all the medals and all the stars, and we figured he'd be diminished. And he wasn't.' "

Indeed, perhaps the most striking polling results aren't Powell's positives but his remarkably low negatives. Among whites and blacks alike, only five per cent report an unfavorable impression of him. It's in that respect, above all, that the familiar Eisenhower analogy gains force. And Powell himself clearly has a Republican model in Eisenhower, whose appeal he characterizes in terms that resonate with his own public profile. "Eisenhower was a person who could put together very interesting coalitions and be a natural war leader the people would respect," he says. "They saw Ike and they felt comfortable and confident. I like Ike." But a black Eisenhower? Well, why not? Julian Bond says of Powell, "He is a handsome, clean-cut guy, but he's not sexy. And therefore not threatening. Powell is a good-looking guy, but he's not going to steal your girl."

Alma Powell herself is widely viewed as a substantial political asset—someone who is both sophisticated and anodyne. She comes from a family that has been part of the black haute bourgeoisie for several generations. She has inherited an understated sense of cultural security and social confidence: an absolute knowledge of where she fits into society, black and white. She is also at home with power, her own and others'. Discussing what kind of First Lady she would make, Weinberger compares her to the patrician Barbara Bush, in that "she is a lady who is perfectly comfortable with herself and therefore makes everybody else feel very much at ease." He adds that "the people who give a lot of parties and people who go to a lot of parties and people who are in various embassies around the world, they all feel the same way about her: she would also be a very fine hostess in the White House." What strikes me is that there seems to be nothing outlandish about this subject of conversation—a subject that is, historically speaking, outlandish indeed. But plausibility—supreme plausibility—is an attribute that the General and his wife have in common.

You might argue that this plausibility has never fully been put to the test—subjected to the rough-and-tumble of electoral politics. You might argue that Powell's scant unfavorable rating is simply a reflection of that. As a candidate, Powell would have to be reconciled to the sheer negativity of the modern political campaign—a particular concern for a man who, as

his close friends affirm, can be short-tempered and sensitive to criticism. Something that Alma once said stays with me, too: "Even if you don't have any skeletons in your closet, someone in your family might."

"Once you get in, the knives come out, and they start poking away at you, shaving away your image," says Kurt Schmoke, whose own name was once bandied about as a possible candidate for higher office. And Vernon Jordan cites a sobering precedent: "In 1980, the press just pushed—pushed—Ted Kennedy into the race, and the moment he got into it they cut his dick off." Cornel West foresees another potential development on the campaign trail: "Once the ugly attacks and assaults really begin, Colin Powell will be forced, to some degree, to come out swinging. Then they'll say, 'Oh, my God, he is a black man. Look at him. He's full of rage. He's been that all the time.'" And many of Powell's friends would forfeit the dream of the Oval Office in order to protect the aura that he now enjoys. Quincy Jones, a man who, as an entertainment magnate, has made the manufacture of image his stock-in-trade, tells me, "I hope from the bottom of my heart that he doesn't run. Because I would not like to see that fortress attacked. And it would be an attack like you can't believe. He doesn't have to do that for us or anybody else. I would like to just see him remain an icon."

These are sentiments that Powell well understands. "You flatter me by saying, 'You're the first guy who could ever really do it,'" he tells me. "Well, isn't that, in and of itself, almost there?"

"But it's the difference between being John the Baptist and being Jesus Christ," I say. "And you have to decide how you want to be remembered." Then a thought occurs to me. "One ends up with his head on a platter, one's nailed to the cross." Put that way, there doesn't seem much to choose between. Powell explodes with delighted laughter.

While the guessing and second-guessing mount, he'll use his book tour as trial balloon. "Time will run out on me in the fall, and I will have to make a decision. And so the book tour is an important part of this," he says. "I have no illusions about what I have right now. I have a great deal of general celebrity-hero popularity. It is not political popularity, and so the book tour will give me some indication of what I'll have to put up with as a political figure. And when I come off that, then I will do an analysis of what it really requires, and whether I have a vision that is sufficiently different from the vision that's out there. And then Alma and I will sit down. And then one night my instinct will take over and say, 'This is what I want.'"

Powell isn't the only one who's figuring the angles. Despite the General's maxim about never making a decision too late, Caspar Weinberger and many other advisers think it's already too late for him to consider a Presidential bid—assuming that this is indeed what he's considering. Weinberger evidently has other plans for him. "You need to have really started the thing two or three years ago," he says. "This business of lining up delegates in each state and getting on the ballot and getting committees and getting the money and running about eighteen or twenty major campaigns virtually simultaneously takes a very large organizational structure. Now, I've urged him to think very seriously about the option of Vice-President, because if he became a Vice-President with Dole, who might very well not take a second term, Colin would be in an absolutely superb position. I've heard the suggestion quite frequently that Dole had not only offered him the Vice-Presidency but also the job of Secretary of State, which is perfectly legal, constitutionally. That, of course, would remove

any worries about the office itself being too trivial.”

“It’s an intriguing idea,” Powell says. “The theory behind it is: God, why would anybody want to be the Vice-President? The Secretary of State-Vice-President idea is a way of taking away some of the misery of being Vice-President, which puts you in hiding somewhere. They park you for four years. I think there’s a problem. I don’t think you can do two jobs well at the same time, and there is a job for the Vice-President.” Some people have advised him to wait out the bruising process of the election and then accept a high-level political appointment. “But my instinct tells me that if it’s that important to you, then prepare to fight for it,” he says. Another theory, after all, is that the Dole camp is floating the possibility of the offer simply as a stratagem to keep Powell from entering the race.

Ron Walters, who doubts Powell’s viability as a Presidential candidate, speaks of the Vice-Presidential slot as the best way in for Powell: “I think he’s probably figured out that that’s the only way that a black person is going to be President. Every day Powell doesn’t make the decision to run, money slips and goes to Dole. Now, some of that money is going to go to Dole with strings attached, and some of those will be Powell strings. So I think Powell loses nothing by making money off his book right now and getting himself in position to be Vice-President.”

If the electoral appeal of the combination seems obvious, however, it is not universally viewed as a cause for rejoicing. When I ask Roger Wilkins if he’d support a Dole-Powell ticket, he grimaces and says, “That’s hard. It would be an act of self-diminution for Powell to accept that slot.”

“Now, there’s another thing that nobody recommends,” Powell says. “But I have to think about it: I’m only going to be sixty-three in 1999—nine years younger than Dole is now.” But Powell is a canny man, and he knows how short the national attention span can be. Wilkins says, “Look, we need competition between the parties. As you look at the array of candidates, Powell is quite arguably the ablest. A black man who is admired can make the country understand that getting on with solving our racial problems is not special pleading but a matter of urgency for the entire American community. But Powell has to show up with a program that addresses the critical needs the American people have. If he uses this persona to step out and express deep concerns about the country’s economic insecurity and says, ‘I represent a better chance of finding an answer to these questions than anyone else,’ then I think he will sweep the country.”

Colin Powell could be the first black person to be President—and that possibility must have a magnetic pull. But he also realizes that a successful Powell run could permanently alter the political landscape—and the pull of that must be equally powerful. We are sitting together in his Fourth of July office, under the watchful gaze of three Presidents. Just consider, I say to Powell: if he were to secure a Republican nomination and take the black vote with him, the electoral shift would transform party politics—representing, potentially, the most significant realignment since Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s second election, in 1936. “It would be a new Republican Party,” I point out.

For once, his eyes seem a little misty. “It would be a new Democratic Party,” he replies, not missing a beat. “They’ve never had to worry about a core constituency of black folks. I mean, no party has really lost its core, core constituents, before. And there’s just nothing you can do to correct it. Many black congressmen have said to me, ‘If you come out, I can’t go nowhere. Go out and campaign against you? That’d be crazy.’ They can’t. They won’t. A

number of them have said, 'You know we'll campaign for you wherever you are.' "

Imagine, if you will, the Democrats' totemic constituents on the hustings for a Republican candidate. What if this actually came about, I ask him. What if the center held?

"It's hard to redefine or create a new center in a couple of months." The General gives me one of his owlish looks, but there is mischief in his eyes. "I could do it in four years."