

With the sad passing of General Colin Powell I thought it appropriate to use one of his speeches as the basis of this DEI newsletter. I looked at several and decided on his commencement speech at Howard University in 1994. In it he addresses hatred and racism from multiple perspectives. The article begins with a synopsis by a writer from the Howard University magazine. If you read to the end of the speech you will probably learn some interesting history about Howard. If you read his autobiography, there are some incidents he had with the police while stationed in the south.

Colin Powell

(1937 -)

Commencement Address at Howard University

Washington, D.C. - May 14, 1994



Colin Powell

When retired General Colin Powell stepped to the podium to address the 1994 graduating class of Howard University, the Washington, D.C. campus was reeling from racial turmoil. That winter, Khalid Abdul Muhammad, a member of the black nationalist Nation of Islam, had delivered two speeches at Howard making racist and anti-Semitic statements. The second speech drew loud applause as Muhammad interwove messages of black empowerment with hate-filled rhetoric.¹

Critics berated Howard for tolerating Muhammad's diatribes and debates raged on campus about the limits of free speech. A CBS news show hosted by Connie Chung featured a small campus rally in which a few students and some outsiders blamed Jews for aiding in the death of Martin Luther King Jr.²

Colin Powell, a lifelong soldier, took on the role of peacemaker. In his speech, Powell strongly defended Howard's decision to allow Muhammad to speak on campus. At the same time, he warned, "for this freedom to hear all views, you bear a burden to sort out wisdom from foolishness." Racial hatred, he said, is foolish. For Powell – a man shaped by his career in the United States Army - this was obvious.

In his 1995 biography, *My American Journey*, Powell says the military was "living the democratic ideal ahead of the rest of America." It's a fact he says gets lost in public memory. On July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman signed an executive order banning segregation in the armed services. Powell believes he and many others benefited profoundly from "less discrimination, a truer merit system, and a leveler playing field" in the military. The Army, Powell says, is what enabled him to "love my country, with all its flaws, and to serve her with all my heart."

Colin Powell was born in New York City in 1937 and grew up in the Bronx. His parents were from Jamaica. Powell was raised in a large extended family and a neighborhood filled with Jews, Italians, Hispanics, African Americans and other West Indians. "A certain rough-edged racial tolerance prevailed," Powell wrote in his biography.³ To Powell, the South Bronx of his childhood was a vibrant, exciting place to be.

Powell's parents held stable, working-class jobs in the garment district of Manhattan. His mother was a seamstress, his father a shipping supervisor. They had a comfortable life, but expected their children to do better by going to college. "Education meant the difference between wrapping packages or sewing buttons all day and having a real profession," Powell wrote.⁴ Powell had no idea what that profession might be, and no particular ambition, but in 1954, he entered the City College of New York.

Powell was quickly drawn to the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) and discovered his calling. He was wooed by several of ROTC's military fraternities and chose the Pershing Rifles (PRs). He loved every aspect of ROTC and, especially, life with the PRs. "The discipline, the structure, the camaraderie, the sense of belonging were what I craved," Powell wrote. "Race, color, background, income meant nothing. The PRs would go the limit for each other and for the group. If this was what soldiering was all about, then maybe I wanted to be a soldier."⁵

Indeed he did. Over the course of a 35-year career, Powell rose from second lieutenant in 1958 to the rank of four-star general, which he was awarded in 1989. Powell capped his career by serving as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – the highest post in the U.S. military -- from 1989 to 1993. He oversaw the first Persian Gulf War in 1991 and emerged an immensely popular national figure.

When Powell retired from the military in 1993, politicians on both sides of the aisle urged him to "think big about his future."⁶ As he toured the country promoting his autobiography, there was widespread speculation that Powell might become the nation's first black president, as a Republican or a Democrat.⁷ Powell had yet to declare a party allegiance.

After agonizing about the decision, in the fall of 1995 Powell announced he would not to run. Powell realized he didn't have the stomach for what would surely be a brutal campaign. He said he just didn't want to be president badly enough.⁸ Nevertheless, Powell remained a powerful Washington insider and in 2001, President George W. Bush tapped him to serve as Secretary of State. Powell held the post until he retired in 2005.

Though he'd become an active Republican, in 2008 Powell endorsed Democratic candidate Barack Obama for president, calling him a "transformational figure." Speaking on NBC's Meet

the Press, Powell said Obama "has given us a more inclusive, broader reach into the needs and aspirations of our people." Powell praised Obama for "crossing lines -- ethnic lines, racial lines, generational lines."⁹

Powell criticized the Republican Party for doing the opposite. Some Republicans circulated rumors that Obama was secretly a Muslim with possible ties to Islamic terrorists. "The correct answer is, he is not a Muslim," Powell said. "He's a Christian. He's always been a Christian. But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer's no. That's not America. Is something wrong with some seven-year-old, Muslim-American kid believing that he or she could be president?"¹⁰ For the son of Jamaican immigrants who had once had a chance at the presidency himself, the answer was no.

Listen to the speech

The real challenge of course in being a commencement speaker at any college is trying to figure out how long you're going to talk. *[Yeah! laughter]*

If you ask the students the answer is very, very simple: talk for about four minutes and then sit down. *[laughter, applause]* Polls have been taken that show that 10 years after the event, 80 percent of all graduating students don't have a clue who their commencement speaker was. *[laughter]* Well you ain't going to do that to me, the name is Powell: P-O-W-E-L-L.

Now the parents who are here today, the parents and family members behind you, they have a different view of this matter. They are arrayed in all their finery. They have waited a long time for this day – some of them not sure it would ever come. *[laughter]* And they want it to last, so their advice to me is, "Go on, talk for about two to three hours. We brought lunch and we want our money's worth."

The faculty member sitting up here over there somewhere who suggested me in the first place is nervous. He or she is hoping that the speech will be long enough to be respectable, but not so long that he has to take leave on Monday morning for a few weeks to escape the posse.

So the poor commencement speaker is left with the original problem of how long to speak. And I have a simple rule: I respond to audience reaction. If you are appreciative and applaud loudly very early on, you get a nice, short speech. *[applause, cheers, chatter]*

[laughing] All right, let's get serious, huh? I want to say a few words about the controversy that your campus has been embroiled in, in recent weeks. You know, this controversy has a positive side as well: it has caused this university family to go through a process of self-examination, and that is always a healthy thing to do.

And since so many people have been giving advice to the Howard family about how to handle this matter, I thought I would give you a little advice as well. I'm good at giving advice to people.

And the first piece of advice is that, I believe with all my heart that Howard must continue to serve as an institution of learning excellence where freedom of speech is strongly encouraged and rigorously protected. *[applause]*

That is at the very essence and heart of a great university and there is no doubt that Howard is a great university.

And freedom of speech means permitting the widest range of views to be presented, however controversial those views may be.

The First Amendment right of free speech is intended to protect the controversial and even the outrageous word, and not just comforting platitudes, too mundane to need protection.

Some say that by hosting controversial speakers who shock our sensibilities, Howard is in some way promoting or endorsing that message – not at all. Howard has helped put that message in perspective while protecting their right to be heard, so the message can be exposed to the full light of day for comment and criticism.

I, for one, have every confidence in the ability of the administration, and the faculty and the students of Howard University to determine who should speak on this campus – no outside help needed, thank you very much. *[applause]*

I also have complete confidence in the students of Howard to make informed, educated judgments about what you hear.

But for this **freedom to hear all views, you bear a burden to sort out wisdom from foolishness.** There is great wisdom in the message of self-reliance, of education, of hard work, and of the need to raise strong families. **But there is utter foolishness, there is evil, and there is danger in the message of hatred,** or of condoning violence, however cleverly the message is packaged or entertainingly it is presented. *[applause]*

We must, we must find nothing to stand up and cheer about or applaud in a message of racial or ethnic hatred. *[applause, cheers]*

I was at the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela in South Africa earlier this week. *[applause, cheers]*. You were there, too, by the magic of television and together we experienced that remarkable event. Together, we saw what can happen when people stop hating and begin reconciling.

DeKlerk the jailer became DeKlerk the liberator, and Mandela the prisoner became Mandela the president. *[applause]* Twenty-seven years of imprisonment did not embitter Nelson Mandela. He invited his three jail keepers to the ceremony. He used his liberation to work with his former tormentors to create a new South Africa and to eliminate the curse of apartheid once and for all from the face of the earth. What a glorious example he is to us, what a glorious day it was.

Last week you also saw Prime Minister Rabin of Israel and PLO Chairman Arafat sign another agreement on their still difficult, long road to peace, trying to end hundreds of years of hatred and two generations of violence. And over the last two or three days you have seen Palestinian authorities move back into the Gaza Strip and into the town of Jericho.

In these two historic events in South Africa and the Middle East, intractable enemies have shown how you can join hands and create a force of moral authority more powerful than any army – moral authority that can change the world. And although there are still places of darkness in the world where the light of reconciliation has not yet penetrated, these two beacons of hope show what can be done when men and women of goodwill work together for peace and for progress.

There is a message in those two historic events for those of us assembled here today: As the world goes forward, we cannot start going backwards. African-Americans have come too far and we have too far yet to go to take a detour into the swamp of hatred. We, as a people who have suffered so much from the hatred of others must not now show tolerance for any movement or any philosophy that has as its core the hatred of Jews or the hatred of any other group. Our future – *[applause]* – our future lies in the philosophy of love and understanding and caring and building. Not of hating and tearing down. We know that – each and every one of us know that to the depth of our heart – and we must be prepared to stand up for it and speak up for it. We must not be silenced, if we would live up to the legacy of those who have gone before us from this campus.

I have no doubt, my friends, that this controversy will pass and Howard University will emerge even stronger, even more than ever a symbol of hope, of promise, and of excellence. That is your destiny, I am sure!

Ambassador Annenberg, one of your honorees today, is a dear friend of mine and as you have heard he is one of America's leading businessmen and greatest philanthropists. You have heard of his contributions to education and of his contributions to this school.

A few years ago I told Mr. Annenberg about a project I was involved in to build a memorial to the Buffalo Soldiers, those brave black cavalymen of the West. *[cheers, applause]* Their valor had long gone unrecognized, and I was anxious to do something to create a memorial in their honor. And I called my friend Walter and he immediately responded, and gave us the resources we needed to help build that memorial which stands proudly at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas this very day. *[applause]*

Those Buffalo Soldiers were formed in 1867, at the same time as Howard University. It is even said that your mascot, the bison, comes from the nickname for those soldiers, the Buffalo Soldiers.

Both Howard and the Buffalo Soldiers owe their early success to the dedication and to the faith of white military officers of the Union army who served in the Civil War. In Howard's case, of course, it was your namesake, Maj. Gen. Oliver Howard. For the 10th Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers,

it was Col. Benjamin Grierson who formed and commanded that regiment for almost 25 years. And he fought for that entire time to achieve equal status for his black comrades.

Together, for the last 127 years Howard University and the Buffalo Soldiers have tried to show what black Americans were capable of when given education and given the opportunity; and when shown respect and when accorded dignity.

I stand here today as a direct descendant of those Buffalo Soldiers, and of the Tuskegee Airmen, and all the black men and women who have served the nation in uniform. *[applause]* All of whom, all of whom served in their time and in their way, and with whatever opportunity existed at that time, to break down the walls of discrimination and racism, to make the path easier for those of us who came after them. I climbed on their backs and I stood on their shoulders. I took advantage of the sacrifice they made to reach the top of my chosen profession, and become chairman of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff.

And I will never forget my debt to them. I didn't just show up; I climbed on the backs of those who never had the opportunity that I had. *[applause]*

I will never forget, and you must never forget, the debt we owe to those who came before us, and to the white Col. Griersons and the white Gen. Howards and the distinguished Ambassador Annenbergs of the year, who helped me over the 35 years of my life as a soldier.

And so my friends, never forget the debt that you owe to the people who came before you. And those who came before me in the military would say to me now if they were here, "Well done. And now let others climb on your shoulders."

Howard's Buffalo Soldiers did the same thing, and on their shoulders of those who came before you now stand governors and mayors and congressman and ROTC generals and doctors and artists; writers and teachers and leaders in every segment of American society.

And they did it all for the class of 1994. So that you can continue climbing to reach the top of the mountain, while always remembering to reach back and down to help those less fortunate. *[applause]*

You face great expectations. Much has been given to you and much is expected from you. You have been given a quality education presented by a distinguished faculty who sit here today in pride of you. You have inquiring minds and strong bodies given to you by God and by your parents, who sit behind you today and pass on to you all of their still unrealized dreams and ambitions. You have been given citizenship in a country like none other on earth, with opportunities available to you like nowhere else on earth, beyond anything that was available to me when I sat in a place similar to you 36 years ago.

What will be asked of you is hard work. Nothing will be handed to you. You are entering a life of continuous study and struggle to achieve your goals; a life of searching to find that which you do well and which you love doing. Never stop seeking.

I want you to have faith in yourselves. I want you to believe to the depth of your soul that you can accomplish any task that you set your mind and your energy and your heart to. I want you to be proud of your heritage. Study your origins. Teach your children racial pride and draw strength and inspiration from the culture of our forbearers. *[applause]*

Not, not as a way of drawing back from American society and its European roots, but as a way of showing that there are other roots as well – African and Caribbean roots that are also a source of nourishment for the American family tree.

To show, to show that African-Americans are more than a product of our slave experience. To show that our varied backgrounds are as rich as that of any other American – not better or greater, but every bit as equal. Our black heritage must be a foundation stone we can build on, and not a place to withdraw into.

I want you to fight racism. But remember, as Dr. King and President Mandela have taught us, racism is a disease of the racist. Never let it become yours. Racism is a disease that you can help cure by standing up for your rights, and by your commitment to excellence and to performance. By being ready to take advantage of your rights and the opportunities that will come from those rights.

Never, never let the dying hand of racism rest on your shoulder, weighing you down. Always let racism always be someone else's burden to carry in their heart. *[applause]*

And as you seek your way in the world, never fail to find a way to serve your community. Use your education and your success in life to help those still trapped in cycles of poverty and violence.

Above all, never lose faith in America. Its faults are yours to fix, not to curse. America is a family: There may be differences and disputes within the family, but we must not allow the family to be broken into warring factions. From the diversity of our people, let us draw strength and not seek weakness.

Believe in America with all your heart and soul, with all of your mind. Remember, that it remains the "last, best hope of Earth." You are its inheritors and its future is today placed in your hands.

And so, my young friends, go forth from this place today inspired by those who went before you. Go forth with the love of your families and the blessings of your teachers. Go forth to make this a better country, a better society. Prosper, raise strong families, remembering that all you will leave behind at the end are your good works and your children.

Go forth with my most humble but sincere congratulations. And always let your dreams be your only limitations. Now and forever. Thank you, God bless you, and have a great life! *[applause]*