

Four stars on a general's shoulders can make his journey look inevitable. Colin Powell's was anything but. He was not raised in a political dynasty, educated at West Point, or identified in childhood as a future statesman. He was born Colin Luther Powell on April 5, 1937, in Harlem and raised in the South Bronx by Jamaican immigrant parents, Luther and Maud Powell. His father worked in shipping; his mother was a seamstress. Their household was not wealthy, but it was steady, disciplined, and held together by the immigrant conviction that work, education, and respectable conduct could move a family forward. Powell attended New York City public schools and graduated from Morris High School without establishing himself as an exceptional scholar. At the City College of New York, he studied geology and later admitted that he had been an ordinary student, sometimes more interested in getting through school than conquering it. This matters because the beginning of his story was not brilliance announcing itself. It was an unfocused young man waiting to encounter the environment that would call his abilities into service.

That environment was the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps. ROTC is a college-based program that teaches military leadership while preparing students to become commissioned officers after graduation. A commissioned officer does more than perform assigned duties; that officer is entrusted with authority over soldiers, planning, discipline, equipment, and potentially human lives. Powell joined partly because he was attracted to the uniforms and precision of the Pershing Rifles drill team. What began with appearance became identity. ROTC gave him rules that made sense, measurable standards, a team that depended on him, and a ladder whose next rung could be reached through preparation. The average student became a distinguished military graduate and cadet colonel, the highest student rank in his program. In 1958, he graduated with a degree in geology and received his commission as a second lieutenant in the Regular Army. The official Joint Chiefs history of Powell records the remarkable contrast plainly: he had entered City College searching for direction and left prepared to lead soldiers.

He entered the Army during a complicated racial transition. President Harry Truman had ordered the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948, but an executive order could end official segregation faster than it could remove prejudice from the people administering the institution. Powell could command white soldiers in uniform and still encounter restaurants and businesses in Georgia that refused to serve him because he was Black. The Army offered him authority that civilian America did not always recognize once he passed through the gate of a military installation. He learned to survive that contradiction without pretending it did not exist. His method was seldom confrontation in public. He studied the institution, mastered its expectations, remained composed, and tried to make his performance too strong to dismiss. Some would later admire this as discipline; others would consider it overly accommodating. Both readings contain truth. Powell was not a racial protest leader working against the system from outside. He was an integration-era officer determined to climb through the system, gain power within it, and prove what a Black officer could do when the stated rules were finally applied.

After completing infantry officer training, Ranger School, and Airborne School, Powell was assigned to West Germany as a platoon leader in the 3rd Armored Division. A platoon leader is usually a young officer responsible for several dozen soldiers—their training, conduct, safety, readiness, and performance. This is where leadership stops being a speech and becomes a daily obligation. Weapons must function. Soldiers must be fed. Orders must be understood. Problems hidden from senior officers must somehow reach the person capable of solving them. Powell watched effective commanders closely and absorbed their habits. He learned that soldiers quickly distinguish an officer who merely possesses rank from one who understands their work. In 1962, he married Alma Vivian Johnson, a Birmingham, Alabama, native whom he had met on a blind date. Their marriage lasted almost six decades, and they raised three children: Michael, Linda, and Annemarie. Alma lived through the repeated separations, relocations, anxieties, and public pressures that military biographies often compress into a sentence, even though no long military career belongs only to the person wearing the uniform.

Powell's first Vietnam tour began in December 1962, before most Americans understood how deeply the United States was becoming involved there. He served as an adviser to a South Vietnamese infantry battalion. An adviser was supposed to train and assist South Vietnam's forces rather than command them directly, but the distinction could become thin in combat. Powell lived in the field, moved through jungle terrain, and accompanied troops fighting communist forces commonly called the Viet Cong. During a patrol, he stepped on a punji stake—a sharpened stake concealed in the ground as a booby trap. The wound became badly infected and forced his evacuation. He received the Purple Heart, which is awarded to service members wounded or killed as a result of enemy action. The injury was physically painful, but the larger education was political. Powell saw young men being sent into danger while national leaders struggled to define what victory meant, how much force they were willing to use, how long the commitment would last, and whether the South Vietnamese government could sustain itself. Those questions stayed with him long after his foot healed.

He returned to Vietnam in 1968 as a major with the Americal Division. By then, the war was larger, bloodier, and increasingly distrusted at home. Powell initially served as a battalion executive officer and then moved into divisional operations. An executive officer is the person who helps turn a commander's decisions into functioning reality, while an operations officer coordinates missions, movement, personnel, aircraft, weapons, and supplies. These positions fit Powell's mind. He was organized, quick with information, comfortable briefing senior leaders, and able to make a sprawling organization behave as though its parts belonged together. On November 16, 1968, the helicopter carrying Powell and others crashed and caught fire. Although injured, he repeatedly returned to the burning wreckage to pull people out. The act was not a television performance or a safe display of courage; fuel and ammunition in a burning military aircraft could turn the wreck into an explosion. He received the Soldier's Medal, an award for heroism that does not require direct combat with an enemy. The medal preserved by the National Museum of African American History and Culture represents

one of the clearest facts about Powell: when people were trapped in immediate danger, he went back for them.

Yet Vietnam also exposes a more troubling part of his development. On March 16, 1968, before Powell joined the Americal Division, American soldiers murdered hundreds of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, including children, women, and elderly people. Later that year, a soldier named Tom Glen wrote military leaders describing broader patterns of brutality and mistreatment of Vietnamese civilians. Glen did not present Powell with a detailed report identifying the My Lai massacre itself; his allegations concerned the wider conduct and attitudes of American troops. Powell was assigned to assess the complaint. He did not interview Glen, conducted what appears to have been a limited review, and produced a response that treated abuse as isolated rather than systemic. He wrote that relations between Americal soldiers and Vietnamese people were “excellent.” The documented account of Powell’s memorandum has followed his reputation because it reveals how an officer skilled at protecting soldiers could also protect an institution from information it needed to confront.

Precision is important here. Powell did not participate in the My Lai massacre, and it is inaccurate to say that he personally investigated the massacre and covered up its exact facts. He arrived afterward and responded to a separate letter alleging widespread abuse. But that distinction does not make his response acceptable. Glen raised an alarm, and Powell approached it with the instinct of an officer defending his division. Whether he consciously concealed wrongdoing or simply accepted the answers most comfortable to his superiors cannot be proved from the memorandum alone. What can be said is that he failed to treat a serious warning with the curiosity and moral urgency it deserved. This would become one of the tensions running through his life: Powell’s loyalty made him dependable, but loyalty to an organization can become dangerous when it outranks loyalty to truth. The same discipline that helps a person move through powerful institutions can teach that person to absorb doubts, protect the team, and avoid becoming the source of disruption.

After Vietnam, Powell’s rise accelerated. He completed a master’s degree in business administration at George Washington University and was chosen as a White House Fellow, a highly competitive program that places promising professionals near senior government officials. He worked in the Office of Management and Budget, where government ambitions are translated into programs, personnel, and money. He later commanded a battalion in South Korea and a brigade in the 101st Airborne Division. A battalion contains hundreds of soldiers; a brigade contains several thousand. With each promotion, the scale changed. He was no longer responsible simply for whether individual soldiers could perform. He had to build systems in which other leaders could make good decisions, standards could survive his absence, and information could move upward without being distorted.

Powell’s advancement also teaches something that success stories sometimes hide: ability matters, but sponsorship matters too. Sponsorship is more than friendly advice. A

sponsor is a senior person willing to place someone in consequential jobs, introduce that person to powerful decision-makers, and attach part of his own reputation to the person's future. Officials such as Frank Carlucci and Caspar Weinberger recognized Powell's skill and repeatedly brought him into important Pentagon assignments. He learned how civilian officials think, how budgets influence strategy, how bureaucracies resist change, and how decisions are shaped before they reach a president. He became fluent in two forms of power: command, which relies on lawful authority, and influence, which depends on trust. Powell did not rise only because white officials opened doors for him, but neither did he rise in a vacuum. He performed extraordinarily after those doors opened. A mature understanding of opportunity holds both facts at once.

In 1986, Powell took command of V Corps in West Germany, placing him in charge of a major Army formation facing the Soviet bloc during the Cold War. Months later, President Ronald Reagan called him back to Washington as deputy national security adviser. In late 1987, he became national security adviser, the first Black American to hold that position. The national security adviser coordinates military, diplomatic, and intelligence recommendations for the president. The position does not command troops or independently determine foreign policy; its power comes from controlling the process through which options, disagreements, and information reach the Oval Office. Powell entered the job after the Iran-Contra scandal had damaged the Reagan administration. Iran-Contra involved secret arms sales to Iran and the unlawful effort to support Contra forces fighting Nicaragua's government despite congressional restrictions. Powell had served close to Defense Secretary Weinberger during part of the affair, and later investigations raised questions about how completely several officials, including Powell, had disclosed what they knew. He was not charged with a crime, but the episode demonstrated again how proximity to power can test the boundary between discretion and concealment.

As national security adviser, Powell helped restore structure to a disorderly process. He was not Reagan's ideological architect; he was the organizer who made sure positions were heard, decisions were recorded, and agencies understood what had been decided. He helped coordinate summit meetings with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev during the final phase of the Cold War. His strength was not creating grand theories about remaking the world. It was taking a room full of competing interests and producing a decision that could actually be carried out. By April 1989, he had received his fourth star and briefly commanded U.S. Army Forces Command, overseeing Army forces based in the United States. Then President George H. W. Bush selected the fifty-two-year-old Powell as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The title can be misunderstood. The chairman is the president's principal uniformed military adviser, not the battlefield commander of every operation. The chairman helps evaluate threats, shape strategy, present military options, communicate with regional commanders, and explain what troops will require to achieve political goals. When Powell assumed the office on October 1, 1989, he became its first Black chairman, first ROTC-commissioned chairman, and youngest officer ever appointed to the position. That

breakthrough carried unusual weight. He occupied the highest military office in a nation where Black soldiers had once fought in segregated units, been denied equal recognition, and returned from wars to second-class citizenship. His appointment did not repair all of that history. It did, however, alter what young officers could imagine when they looked toward the top of the command structure.

His timing was extraordinary. The Berlin Wall fell weeks after he became chairman. Communist governments collapsed across Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union dissolved, and the central threat around which the American military had been organized for decades rapidly changed. Powell helped manage a major reduction in the armed forces while trying to preserve combat readiness. Cutting a military is not simply subtracting names from a payroll. Bases close, units disappear, careers end, equipment priorities shift, and the remaining force must still be prepared for emergencies no planner has predicted. Powell's years studying budgets and bureaucracy became as important as his knowledge of combat.

The first major use of force under his chairmanship came in Panama in December 1989. Operation Just Cause removed General Manuel Noriega, whose regime had become openly hostile to the United States and whose involvement in drug trafficking had led to a federal indictment. American forces quickly overwhelmed Panama's military and captured Noriega, but the operation also killed Panamanians, displaced civilians, and left lasting disputes over the death toll and the legitimacy of the invasion. Powell considered the mission an example of decisive action: define the target, deploy enough force to control events, and finish quickly. For many Panamanians, however, the operation was not a clean demonstration of strategic competence. It was a foreign invasion experienced in neighborhoods and homes. This difference in viewpoint is essential whenever military success is discussed. An operation can achieve Washington's stated objective and still leave suffering that official summaries place at the edge of the page.

The crisis that made Powell internationally famous began in August 1990, when Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait. The conquest threatened Kuwait's population, global oil supplies, and neighboring Saudi Arabia. Powell supported sending forces to defend Saudi Arabia, but he opposed a partial deployment that might invite an Iraqi attack before the United States was ready. Operation Desert Shield became the defensive buildup; Operation Desert Storm became the campaign to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Powell and Defense Secretary Dick Cheney worked with President Bush while General Norman Schwarzkopf commanded the forces in the region. An international coalition was assembled, United Nations resolutions established the demand that Iraq leave Kuwait, and hundreds of thousands of troops and enormous quantities of equipment were moved into position.

When war came in January 1991, the coalition began with an extensive air campaign and followed it with a ground offensive that defeated Iraqi forces with startling speed. The ground campaign lasted roughly one hundred hours. Kuwait was liberated, and the coalition stopped without marching to Baghdad to overthrow Saddam Hussein. That

decision has often been misunderstood as a failure to finish the job. The authorized objective was to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait, not occupy Iraq and replace its government. Powell and other officials feared that taking Baghdad would fracture the coalition, exceed the United Nations mandate, require a long occupation, and make the United States responsible for governing a divided country. Twelve years later, many of those warnings would prove prophetic.

Powell's approach became known as the Powell Doctrine, although it was never an official law or a rigid checklist authored in one sitting. It grew partly from the lessons he drew from Vietnam and from Defense Secretary Weinberger's earlier thinking. Before using military force, leaders should identify a vital interest, define an achievable political objective, consider peaceful alternatives, secure public and allied support, commit sufficient resources, and decide how the mission will end. If force becomes necessary, it should be decisive rather than hesitant. The doctrine's wisdom lies in forcing civilian leaders to connect military action to political purpose. Soldiers can seize ground, destroy equipment, and remove governments, but they cannot manufacture a stable political settlement merely by being brave.

The doctrine also has limits. "Overwhelming force" can reduce the exposure of American troops while creating overwhelming destruction for people living where that force is applied. A quick battlefield victory can hide unresolved political damage. Public support can be generated through fear or faulty information, which means support alone does not make a war wise. An exit strategy may protect the intervening power while abandoning people left behind. Powell understood better than many officials that wars are easier to begin than control, but his framework still viewed conflict primarily through the responsibilities of an American commander. Television audiences saw the Gulf War as precise, swift, and technologically clean. For civilians under bombardment and soldiers trapped on retreat routes, it was not clean.

Powell stayed on as chairman during the beginning of Bill Clinton's presidency. The two men differed over when American power should be used in humanitarian crises and over Clinton's effort to allow gay people to serve openly in the military. Powell opposed lifting the ban at that time, arguing that open service could harm unit cohesion. The resulting compromise became "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," a policy that permitted gay and lesbian personnel to serve only if they concealed who they were. Thousands would eventually be discharged under it. Powell later accepted that military conditions and attitudes had changed and supported reconsidering the policy, but his original position remains part of his record. He was progressive in racial opportunity while remaining institutionally conservative in other areas. People rarely move through history as a perfectly consistent package of modern beliefs.

He retired from the Army on September 30, 1993, after thirty-five years of service. By then he had become one of the most trusted public figures in the country. His autobiography, *My American Journey*, became a bestseller, and enthusiasm grew around the possibility that he might run for president in 1996. He formally identified as a Republican, although

his support for affirmative action, abortion rights, gun restrictions, and a cautious foreign policy placed him outside parts of the party's conservative base. Powell eventually declined to run, explaining that he did not possess the consuming passion for electoral politics that a presidential campaign required. That decision reveals self-knowledge. He enjoyed public service and authority, but campaigning requires a person to seek power through constant partisan conflict, fundraising, personal exposure, and attack. Powell had mastered appointment and command; he did not pretend that mastery automatically made him suited for every kind of leadership.

His postmilitary work centered heavily on young people. In 1997, he became the founding chairman of America's Promise, an alliance intended to connect children with caring adults, safe environments, education, health support, and opportunities to serve. He also returned repeatedly to City College, helping build the center—and later the school—that carried his name. That work was not ceremonial window dressing. Students and staff remembered him arriving early, talking with young people, listening to their stories, and reminding them that he had once been an uncertain City College student too. He understood that potential is often invisible until structure, encouragement, and responsibility give it somewhere to go. The [City College account of his involvement](#) may reveal more about his idea of legacy than the medals do: he wanted a public college filled with working-class and immigrant students to keep creating routes into leadership.

In January 2001, Powell returned to government as President George W. Bush's secretary of state. He was unanimously confirmed by the Senate and became the first Black American to serve as the nation's chief diplomat. Diplomacy is the management of relations through negotiation, alliances, economic pressure, communication, and compromise; it is not simply being polite to foreign governments. A secretary of state must represent the president's policy abroad while also bringing foreign realities back into the administration. Powell entered office with more international stature than the relatively inexperienced president he served. Inside the State Department, he pushed for better technology, safer facilities, stronger staffing, and more resources. Diplomats appreciated that he treated organizational maintenance as part of national power. An embassy with broken systems and exhausted personnel cannot carry out policy simply because leaders in Washington make confident speeches.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, transformed his term. Powell supported military action against al-Qaeda and the Taliban government that sheltered it. He also used relationships and pressure to secure Pakistan's cooperation, build an international coalition, and frame the response as a struggle against terrorism rather than a war against Islam. Yet the Bush administration soon divided over Iraq. Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld generally favored more aggressive action and had greater access to the president. Powell urged renewed weapons inspections, broader allied support, sufficient troop levels, and serious preparation for what would happen after Saddam Hussein's government fell. The [State Department's historical account](#) confirms that he pressed for a coalition and a long-term occupation

plan. But caution inside a room is not the same as opposition in public. When the president made the decision, Powell remained on the team.

On February 5, 2003, Powell appeared before the United Nations Security Council to present the American case against Iraq. His reputation was the presentation's most valuable evidence. He displayed satellite images, played intercepted conversations, described supposed mobile biological-weapons laboratories, and asserted that Iraq was concealing weapons of mass destruction. He told the council he was presenting facts supported by solid intelligence. The official transcript of that address preserves the certainty of his language. Some of the underlying intelligence came from unreliable sources, including an Iraqi defector given the code name Curveball, whose claims about mobile biological laboratories had not been adequately verified. Powell and his staff had removed some questionable material from earlier drafts, but what remained was still presented with far more confidence than the evidence justified.

The central claims did not hold. Investigators found no active Iraqi stockpiles of the chemical and biological weapons described to the world, and the presidential commission that examined the failure concluded that American intelligence had been wrong in nearly all of its major prewar judgments about Iraqi weapons. Its unclassified report identified poor collection, analytical errors, and the failure to distinguish evidence from assumptions. Powell did not manufacture every false report himself, nor did his speech single-handedly cause the invasion; the administration was already moving toward war. Yet he cannot be reduced to an innocent man tricked by intelligence officers. He was secretary of state, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and the administration's most credible public servant. He chose to lend that credibility to assertions he could not personally verify. His presence reassured people who might not have trusted Cheney or Rumsfeld. In that sense, his credibility was not merely damaged by the speech—it was used.

Powell later called the episode a blot on his record and acknowledged it as a major intelligence failure. Regret matters because it is better than denial, but regret does not reverse consequences. The invasion removed a brutal dictator, yet it also shattered Iraqi institutions, contributed to prolonged occupation and insurgency, intensified sectarian violence, cost American and allied lives, killed and displaced large numbers of Iraqis, and damaged international trust in the United States. Powell had warned that removing a government would make America responsible for the aftermath. He then helped publicly justify the operation without securing the preparation he believed the aftermath required. That is not hypocrisy in its simplest form. It is the tragedy of a person whose identity as a loyal subordinate overpowered his doubts at precisely the moment when his independent judgment was most needed.

Iraq should not erase everything else Powell did as secretary, just as his achievements should not be used to bury Iraq. He worked to manage dangerous tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, improve strained relations with China and Russia, advance international action against HIV/AIDS, increase development assistance, and

pursue negotiations over nuclear programs in Iran, North Korea, and Libya. Libya agreed in 2003 to abandon prohibited weapons programs, an example of diplomacy producing a security result without invasion. Powell supported a diplomatic “Road Map” toward an Israeli and Palestinian settlement, although he could not obtain the sustained commitment required to make it succeed. In September 2004, after a State Department investigation gathered testimony about mass killing, rape, and forced displacement in Darfur, he told Congress that genocide had been committed and that Sudan’s government and the Janjaweed bore responsibility. His Darfur testimony gave an official name to crimes the world was struggling to confront, even though naming them did not produce an adequate international response.

Powell announced his resignation in November 2004 and left office in January 2005. Condoleezza Rice succeeded him, making the transition from the first Black secretary of state to the first Black woman in the office. In later years, Powell became increasingly estranged from the Republican Party. He endorsed Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, Hillary Clinton in 2016, and Joe Biden in 2020. These endorsements were not simply racial solidarity; Powell discussed temperament, competence, inclusion, national security judgment, and what he saw as the Republican Party’s movement away from his values. After the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, he said he could no longer consider himself a Republican. The man once praised as an ideal Republican president ended his life politically unaffiliated, unwilling to treat party membership as a permanent command.

His public image was formal, but the private man was more textured. He loved repairing old cars, especially Volvos and Saabs, because machinery offered a problem that could be inspected, understood, and fixed. He collected leadership rules, enjoyed humor, and resisted the idea that seriousness required constant stiffness. People who worked for him often remembered that he asked junior employees what they needed and expected senior officials to respect the people doing unglamorous work. He believed leaders should gather information widely, decide before delay becomes paralysis, and remain optimistic enough to keep an organization moving. His optimism was not merely cheerfulness. It was an operating principle: people perform differently when a leader communicates that a problem can be solved and that their effort matters.

There was, however, a weakness hiding inside his most admired quality. Powell understood loyalty as a duty to support decisions once debate ended. That principle is necessary in a military chain of command; armies cannot function if every officer treats lawful orders as optional. But senior public servants also have a duty to recognize when obedience is no longer enough. At My Lai’s edge, institutional loyalty narrowed his examination of abuse. Before Iraq, loyalty kept him inside an administration whose case he distrusted more than his public performance revealed. His life therefore teaches two forms of courage. Physical courage runs toward a burning helicopter. Moral courage risks position, belonging, and reputation to prevent a powerful institution from doing harm. Powell demonstrated the first beyond argument. His record with the second was mixed.

Colin Powell died on October 18, 2021, at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center from complications of COVID-19. He was eighty-four and fully vaccinated, but he was being treated for multiple myeloma, a cancer of plasma cells that can severely weaken the immune system and reduce the body's response to vaccination. That medical context is essential; his death was not proof that vaccination was useless. It showed how vulnerable people with serious immune impairment remained during the pandemic. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery after a life that had carried him from a Bronx apartment to the highest military and diplomatic offices in the United States. The awards included a Purple Heart, Bronze Star, Soldier's Medal, Congressional Gold Medal, and two Presidential Medals of Freedom, but the list cannot explain the man by itself.

To appreciate Colin Powell honestly is to refuse both worship and dismissal. He was a barrier breaker whose presence enlarged the imaginable future for Black officers, immigrant families, public-school students, and young people who had not yet found the place where their abilities made sense. He was a courageous soldier, a gifted organizer, a patient diplomat, a devoted mentor, and a public servant who treated preparation as a form of respect. He was also a man whose instinct to protect institutions contributed to serious failures of judgment, most painfully before the Iraq War. His mistakes matter because the consequences of leadership are measured in human lives, not merely in intentions or apologies. His accomplishments matter because he opened doors, improved organizations, steadied governments during dangerous moments, and spent part of his final decades holding those doors open for others. When the medals, mythology, criticism, and praise are placed together, Powell becomes more valuable to us—not less: a disciplined, ambitious, brave, loyal, imperfect man whose triumphs show what preparation can make possible and whose failures warn us that character is tested most severely when truth threatens the team we have spent a lifetime serving.