

# Civil Rights and Colin Powell's American Journey

Tamar SHIOSHVILI\*

The article is dedicated to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington of August 28, 1963.

## Abstract

The fundamental rights of the U.S. are introduced in the Bill of Rights – the first ten amendments to the Constitution – and we often speak of the “protection” by that document. However, individual rights are always at risk if they are not vehemently defended by all the institutions of society (Berman & Allen).

The article depicts the thorny way towards civil rights achievement and is concentrated on important moments in the civil rights movement in America; gives correlation of the attitude of Martin Luther King and Colin Powell in terms of unacceptability of grudge towards white brothers, as destiny of blacks and whites was bound to their freedom.

**Keywords:** Abolition, constitution, journey, opportunities

---

\*Prof. Dr., School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: [tshioshvili@ibsu.edu.ge](mailto:tshioshvili@ibsu.edu.ge)

## Introduction

The world is ignited with news of unsettling disruptions – War in Ukraine, Israel-Palestine conflict, political and economic crisis erupting on a daily basis. At the same time, there is a dynamic, unmistakable propulsion toward freedom. Established democracies find themselves needing to carry on with their dedication to civic responsibility and to review and adjust to policies and practices to keep pace with a new world order. Meanwhile, the quality of democracy can be measured by the scope it protects the rights of all its citizens.

## Civil Rights' Dynamics in the United States

According to the remarks of President-elect Bill Clinton at Howard University, in Washington D.C., January 18, 1993 for the first time in a century and a half, and only the third time in the American republic, two sons of the South are about to assume the mountaintop of American democracy, a president from a small town in Arkansas, a vice president from the hills of Tennessee, both believers in the dream and the obligations that Martin Luther King spoke. "He was our teacher in many ways. He taught us about the pain and promise of America, about something we must all be prepared to do to keep our country going and growing: sacrifice. And he pointed us toward a day of freedom and justice when all Americans could walk hand in hand".

## Declaration of Independence

"All men are created equal", is included in the Declaration of Independence (1776). Although its main draftsman, Thomas Jefferson, was himself holding slaves in Virginia.

Slavery brought polarization among Americans from the very first day of independence. As the South grew more contingent on cotton and

plantation, the confrontation with antislavery northern states increased. The nation impeded that conflict with political compromises. Jefferson realized the contradiction, and his draft condemned the slave trade -although not slavery itself – calling it "a cruel war against human nature".

But the Continental Congress, America's de facto government at that time, deleted the slave trade reference from the Declaration to prevent any disagreement that might fragment its pro-independence consensus.

As the constitution would not be effective until ratified by 9 of the 13 states, it became useful to get to a compromise on the status of the African-American slaves. Northern delegate to the convention James Wilson of Pennsylvania, came to an agreement with three large slave-holding states. Both sides agreed that every five "unfree persons" – slaves – would equate to three people when calculating the size of a state's congressional delegation. They also agreed to obstruct the U.S. Congress for 20 years from passing any law prohibiting the importation of slaves, though Congress later would abolish the slave trade, effective in 1808.

The "three-fifths compromise" has been described as American original sin. The compromise made possible for the states to form a stronger union, but it guaranteed that slavery would continue in the South, where the 1793 creation of the cotton gin\* had triggered the growth of a slave – plantation system of cotton cultivation.

In spite of the fact, that the young nation's political system failed to provide for African Americans the civil rights exercising by their white countrymen, brave men and women were initiating attempts to abolish slavery and to provide, that the United States would stand by its own best ideals.

---

\* In October 1793 Eli Whitney perfected a gin to perform the labor-intensive task of removing seeds from cotton lint. By cleaning 50 pounds of fiber a day by one person, his invention

made cotton a profitable staple for the first time, produced a rapid expansion of its cultivation in the lower south, and increased demand for slave labor.

## **Frederick Douglas**

Resolute women and men – blacks and whites – dedicated their lives to the principle of abolition, the prohibition of slavery. Frederick Douglass, as escaped slave, journalist, publisher was the champion of liberty.

Douglas was born into slavery in 1817. In 1838, Douglass escaped from the plantation where he worked as a field hand and arrived in Massachusetts and joined Anti-slavery society. He, as a remarkable orator, spoke at public meetings throughout the North.

He denounced slavery and maintained that African Americans deserved the civil rights that the U.S. Constitution afforded other Americans. In 1863 Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring the freedom of all slaves still in rebellion. In 1863 Lincoln endorsed the recruitment of black soldiers. The president twice invited Douglass to meet him in White House. Douglass's career continued after the war's end. He laid the foundation of the constitution by working for passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, the postwar amendments, that applied to all men, not just to whites and prohibited the individual states from denying those rights. It should be underlined, that he contributed a lot to women's suffrage and equality (Friedman, 2008).

## **The Underground Railroad**

Contemporaries of Frederick Douglass, both white and blacks adopted a variety of strategies to oppose slavery and provide African Americans with their civil rights. In a nation with half free and half slave states, one reasonable tactic was to direct slaves northwest to freedom.

Members of several religious denominations became initiators of this process. Around 1800s, Quakers began to offer runaway slaves shelter and assistance either to start new lives in the North or to reach Canada. "Fugitive Slave" laws enacted in 1793 and 1850 implied the seizure and return of runaway slaves, but the Quakers decided to nonaggressively disobey the unjust laws. Evangelical Methodists,

Presbyterians, and Congregationalists joined the attempt, which intended to aid greater numbers of escaped slaves find their way out of the South,

Free blacks played prominent roles in the movement, which became known as the Underground Railroad, not because it employed tunnels or trains – it used neither – but for the railroad language it used.

A 'conductor' familiar with the local area would direct one or more slaves to a "station", typically the home of a sympathizing "stationmaster", then to another station, and so on, until the slaves reached free territory. The slaves would usually travel in the darkness, around 16 to 32 kilometers per night. This was very risky. Conductors and slaves would encounter strict punishment or death if they were detained.

The most well-known conductor was an escaped African-American slave – Harriet Tubman. After getting freed in 1849, she returned to the South on 20 Underground Railroad missions that rescued around 300 slaves, involving Tubman's sister, brother and parents. She was adept at disguising, imitating a harmless old woman or an unbalanced old man. No slave in Tubman's care was ever seized. African Americans called her "Moses", and the Ohio River that divided slave states from free states, the "River Jordan", biblical innuendoe to reaching the Promised Land.

## **Virginia Struggle**

The best-known struggle against slavery happened in Virginia in 1831. Nat Turner (1800-1831), a slave in Southampton County, Virginia had been taught reading, writing and religion with the permission of his first master. Preaching, Turner attracted adherers, and imagined himself angelically appointed to lead his people to freedom. On August 22, 1831, Turner with a group of 50-75 slaves armed with knives, hatches, and axes over two days moved from house to house, freeing the slaves they met, killed more than 50 white Virginians, many of them women and children.

In response, local militia tried 48 rebels and hanged 18. Turner escaped, but was detained in a cave later. After trial and conviction, Turner was hanged and his body was excoriated, beheaded, and quartered. Revengeful whites raided any blacks they could find, notwithstanding of their participation in the Turner revolt. Around 200 blacks were beaten, lynched, or murdered (Friedman, 2008).

Africans came to the United States as slaves in chains. Rejected the rights exercised by others as granted, black Americans pledged for freedom and dignity guaranteed to all Americans. The black struggle was the continuation of the dream of the Founding Fathers to see the new republic where all men are equal before the law.

Black America produced generation of leaders who maintained the dream under uttermost obstacles.

### **Marin Luther King Jr.**

With the successful accomplishment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Martin Luther King Jr., continuously devoted his time to the subject of poverty in the United States. Becoming ardent fighter of non-violent civil rights movement, successful boycott of municipal bus line in Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., overturned local ordinance requiring blacks to sit in the back buses. Similar achievements were made in other Southern cities.

During the Great March on Washington in Washington D.C., on August 28, 1963 organized by King, standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his famous historic "I have a Dream" speech in which he requested vigorously to end racism (Puckrein, 1993).

### **Colin Powell (1929)**

General Colin Powell was named chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989, making him the highest-ranking black officer in the U.S. history.

Powell served two tours in Vietnam in the 1960s. He worked with the deputy secretary of defense in the late 1970s and became senior military assistant to the secretary of defense in 1983. After commanding the Corps in Frankfurt, Germany, Powell was named President Reagan's assistant for national security affairs in 1987.

Known for his thorough preparation and professionalism, Powell played a major role in the 1991 Gulf War to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the restructuring of the U.S. military following the end of the Cold War.

Colin's parents had emigrated from Jamaica initially living in Harlem; four years later they moved to the South Bronx. In the biographical book "Colin Powell" by Joseph E. Persico, Colin depicts his residential district in Bronx: "Every few blocks you found a Jewish bakery and a Puerto Rican grocery store. Italians ran the shoe repair shops. I do not recall any black-owned businesses".

Colin had been asked when he first felt a sense of racial identity, when he first understood that he belonged to minority. In yearly years, he recollects, had no such sense, because on Banana Kelly there was no majority. Everybody was either a Jew, an Italian, a Pole a Greek, a Puerto Rican, or, as it was mentioned in those days, a Negro. Racial epithets were uttered vigorously around Kelly Street. Sometimes they led to fistfights. But it was not "You're inferior – I'm better". It was more like redress to their team. Colin mentions, he was after a period of time, that he lasted the malignancy of prejudice, it was much later, and far from Banana Kelly. As Colin recollects, his black ancestors may have been dragged to Jamaica in chains, but they were not dragged to the United States. His parents chose to emigrate to this country for the same reason that Italians, Irish, and Hungarians did, to

seek better lives for themselves and their children, and that was a quite a different emotional and psychological beginning than that of American blacks, whose ancestors were brought to America in chains.

While studying at the City College of New York (CCNY) Colin was named in the second category of "Best Cadet, Company D". He was feeling marvelous, when a white supply sergeant told him: "you want to know why you didn't get best cadet in camp? You think these Southern instructions are going to go back to their colleges and say the best kid here was a Negro?" Colin was stunned more than angered by his words, as he came from a melting-pot community, and didn't want to believe that his worth could be diminished by the color of his skin.

Colin got a more elementary "taste" of racism while driving home. He left CC NY with two white officers. They drove through the night, sporadically stopping at gas stations that had three rest rooms, men, women, and colored, the one Colin had to use. He didn't start to relax until they reached Washington, didn't feel safe until they were north of Baltimore. Colin was reminded of that old routine from the Apollo Theater: "Hey, brother, where you from?" "Alabama". "I'd like to welcome you to the United States and hope you had a pleasant crossing."

Besides, these brief episodes, the summer of 1957 was a jubilation. He was bringing home to his parents the proof, that he had excelled in the college, and he had found something that he did well. He could lead.

Statue of Liberty opened the gateway to this country, public education opened the door. Schools like Colin's sister's Buffalo State Teachers College and CCNY have served as the Harvard and Princeton of the poor. And they served them well. Colin was a champion of public secondary and higher education.

Colin says: "I will speak out for them and support them for as long as I have the good sense to remember where I came from" (ibid, p. 38).

At the graduation ceremony of CCNY college Colin made a speech: "I, Colin Luther Powell, do

solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic." On this occasion Colin underlined: "We live in a more cynical age today. We are embarrassed by expressions of patriotism. But when I said those words almost four decades ago, they sent a shiver down my spine. They still do".

After successful graduation of CCNY Colin was sent to Army in fort Benning, Georgia.

According to Colin the Army was becoming more democratic, but he was plunged back into the Old South every time he left the post. He could go into Woolworth's in Columbus, Georgia, and buy anything he wanted, as long as he did not try to eat there. He could go into a department store and they would take his money, as long as he did not try to use the men's room. He could walk along the street, as long as he did not look at a white woman.

Colin was recalling, that his father had feared, that despite the warnings of Colonel Brookhart's not to rock the boat in the South and be a "good negro", the reality he wanted to ignore, was pushing his way into his life, the luminant code that made it wrong for two men to sit together in a house of God, or share a meal in a restaurant, or use the same bathroom.

Racism was still relatively new to Colin, and he had to find a way to handle it psychologically. Colin began by recognizing his priorities. He wanted above all, to succeed at his Army career. He did not aim to give way to self-destructive rage, no matter how provoked. If people in the South insisted on living by crazy rules, then he would play the hand dealt him for them. If he was to be circumscribed to one end of the playing field, then he was going to be a star on that part of the field. Nothing that happened off-post, none of the indignities, none of the injustices, was going to inhibit his performance. He was not going to let himself become emotionally crippled because he could not play on the whole field. He did not feel inferior, and he was not going to let anybody make him believe he was. He was not going to allow someone else's feelings about him to become his feelings about himself.

"Racism was not just a black problem. It was America's problem. And until the country solved it, I was not going to let bigotry make me a victim instead of a full human being. I occasionally felt hurt; I felt anger; but most of all I felt challenged. I'll show you!" (Colin Powell, p. 43).

## **Conclusion**

Colin Powell is the manifestation of the American dream. Born in Harlem to immigrant parents from Jamaica, he was familiar with the brutal life of the streets. Prevailing over a hardly average start at school, he joined the army, the rest is Colin's journey towards his American Dream, a story of a well lived life. At a time when Americans feel disillusioned with their leaders, life in general, General Powell's ardent views on family, personal responsibility, and in his own

words, "the greatness of America and the opportunities it offers", encourage hope for the future.

## **References**

- Berman, L., Murphy, B.A. (2007). *Approaching Democracy, United States.*
- Clinton, B. (1993). *Howard University, in Washington D.C.*
- Freidman, M. J. (2008). *U.S. Department of State.*
- Persico, E. J. (1996). *My American Journey. Colin Powell, USA.*
- Puckrein, G. A. (1993). *The Civil Rights Movement and the Legacy of Martin Luther King. Jr. U.S. Department of State.*