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COLIN POWELL'S AMERICAN JOURNEY

STEVE CHARNOVITZ | Sep 26, 1995 8:00PM EDT

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Colin L. Powell's autobiography, "My American Journey," is inspirational. Unsurprisingly, it has become a best seller. While much of the story involves the military, the book also portrays Gen. Powell's views on economic policy, and demonstrates his capacity for national leadership.

In our post-Cold War world, "economic strength will be more important than military strength," Gen. Powell explains. The new order will be defined by trade relations, and by the flow of information, capital, technology and goods. Economic integration thus has more potential for influencing a country like Cuba than isolation does. Gen. Powell affirms his faith in the "demonstrated success of the free marketplace." Nevertheless, he does not view any market outcome as necessarily optimal. Government should not interfere when markets work well. But he does favor intervention when needed "to protect public safety and to prevent distortions of competition."

Gen. Powell also supports the continuation of core government services, such as public schools. As he explains it: "I received a free college education because New York taxed its citizens to make this investment in the sons and daughters of immigrants and the working class."

Gen. Powell calls himself a "fiscal conservative," but gives an inadequate explanation of his views. He opposes the continuing buildup of public debt, yet suggests that the current tax burden is too high. He implies that entitlements need to be reduced, yet offers no proposals on what to cut.

He complains that "every tax dollar taken away from a consumer or a business is a dollar that will be spent less efficiently than if left in private hands." But he cannot literally mean that, since he favors public goods such as national defense and the enforcement of civil rights laws.

Gen. Powell is optimistic about the U.S. economy. "Entrepreneurial vitality is strong," he says. Old-line firms are becoming more competitive. But he is deeply worried about America's social problems. "We seem to have lost our sense of shame as a society," he laments.

While Gen. Powell offers no battle plan for attacking America's social problems, he presents some principles that are appealing. Racial preferences are wrong because they breed resentment and because they demean the achievement of minority Americans. The exemplar of married parents nurturing children must be restored. Jobs are the best answer to most of our social ills.

Gen. Powell is not confident that competition between Republicans and Democrats is sufficient to assure sensible policy-making. As he puts it, American voters "channel-surfed past a Republican president in 1992 and a Democratic Congress in 1994." There is too much cynicism and cheap-shot politicking. He hints that a third party may be needed.

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Gen. Powell disclaims a current interest in running for president: It is "a calling that I do not yet hear," he says. Still, with recent polls showing him drawing strong support as an independent, it is time to consider what kind of a president Gen. Powell might make.

His career demonstrates, and his book illustrates, that Gen. Powell has strong management ability. Planning, analysis, crisp decision-making and choosing good subordinates - these are skills Gen. Powell has. Some might dismiss them as basic, yet at least one of these skills has been lacking in each of our recent presidents.

Even if Gen. Powell never runs for public office, his book will persist as a primer on management. With instructive examples, he discusses topics like motivating employees, building teamwork, challenging experts, running meetings and transforming organizations. Some of the most interesting passages in the book are Gen. Powell's accounts of how he related to each of his bosses.

If he does seek the presidency, Gen. Powell will be helped by his integrity. For example, he readily admits to benefiting from government- subsidized education. Although he favors "less government," he does not advocate cuts in education.

By contrast, one presidential candidate, Sen. Phil Gramm, wants to reduce the type of government aid to higher education that was essential to his early career. Gen. Powell says nothing about Sen. Gramm. But he does flash the rapier in noting how many of his militant colleagues of the Reagan-Bush era managed to avoid serving in Vietnam.

Gen. Powell also would benefit from his innate optimism. "I am capable of self-pity," he admits, "but not for long." One cannot imagine Gen. Powell complaining about a national "malaise," as President Jimmy Carter once did.

One question mark about Gen. Powell is his ability to work with Congress.

He has done this for years, of course, but in a supportive rather than a principal role. In an interesting passage of his book, Gen. Powell explains how the military base closing commission works, and then laments its necessity

because of "Congress' shameful unwillingness to abandon the pork barrel and make the hard decisions the people elect it to make."

That kind of language would cause him trouble on Capitol Hill. But it also might demonstrate that subservience is not the only way to get along with Congress.

Gen. Powell seems unlikely to run for president in 1996. As a smart general, he will be reluctant to enter a fight with the odds stacked against him. But if he does run and win, Colin Powell could return moral authority and managerial competence to the White House.

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