

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Alma Powell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Powell, Alma
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell,
Dates:	February 2, 2006 and February 3, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	17 Betacame SP videocassettes (8:39:10).
Abstract:	Civic leader Alma Powell (1937 -) , from a prominent family in Birmingham, Alabama, was the chair of America's Promise: The Alliance for Youth. She is the wife of General Colin L. Powell. Powell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 2, 2006 and February 3, 2006, in McLean, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_009
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Alma Vivian Johnson Powell was born on October 27, 1937 in Birmingham, Alabama to Mildred Elisa Bell and Robert Charles Johnson. Powell is the eldest of two daughters. She attended Pratt Elementary School and Parker High School. Powell’s father was her high school principal. She graduated in 1954 and went on to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee at the age of sixteen. In 1957, Powell graduated from Fisk University with her B.A. degree.

Powell’s first job was as a radio show host. She had a show called 'Luncheon with Alma' that featured women’s news and lunchtime listening music. A year later, Powell decided to move north to Boston, Massachusetts. There, she went to Emerson College to study pathology and audiology. Between 1958 and 1962, Powell worked for the Boston Guild for the Hard of Hearing as an audiologist. In 1962, Powell met her husband, General Colin Powell, and was married the same year in Powell’s hometown of Birmingham. Powell traveled around the world with her husband and family as her husband rose to the rank of general in the U.S. Army. Powell was the chair of America’s Promise - The Alliance for Youth and authored two children’s books, *America’s Promise* and *My Little Wagon*. Powell served as vice chair of the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts and chair of the Pew Center for Civic Change.

Powell received several awards and honors including the doctorate of humane letters from Emerson College in 1996; the Pew Center for Civic Change Award in 1997; and the Washingtonian of the Year Award for 2000.

Powell is married and has three children, Michael, Linda and Annemarie.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Alma Powell was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on February 2, 2006 and February 3, 2006, in McLean, Virginia, and was recorded on 17 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civic leader Alma Powell (1937 -) , from a prominent family in Birmingham, Alabama, was the chair of America's Promise: The Alliance for Youth. She is the wife of General Colin L. Powell.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

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Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Powell, Alma

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Powell, Alma--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

America's Promise--The Alliance for Youth

Occupations:

Civic Leader

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, February 2, 2006 and February 3, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_001_001, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Alma Powell was born on October 27, 1937 to Mildred Bell Johnson and Robert Johnson in Birmingham, Alabama. Her maternal great grandfather was enslaved in Kentucky, where her grandfather was born into slavery. When slavery ended, their former owner gave them land to establish the community of Belltown, Kentucky. Powell's grandfather worked in hotels in nearby Louisville to save money for his education. He attended Berea College, a Presbyterian school in Berea, Kentucky, where he met his wife. He established a school in Belltown and became a Methodist minister. Growing up, Powell's grandmother, also from

Kentucky, served as a teacher's aide. In 1892, after they married, Powell's grandfather became principal of Middlesboro Colored School in Middlesboro, Kentucky, while Powell's grandmother served as a social worker. Together, they raised four children, including Powell's mother, who attended Kentucky Normal and Industrial Institute for Colored Persons in Frankfort. She and her three siblings were teachers.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_001_002, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Alma Powell's maternal great grandfather was enslaved in Kentucky, where his owner provided him and his brother with land when slavery ended. Her maternal grandparents attended Kentucky's Berea College until it was segregated by Kentucky's 1904 Day Law. Natives of Ohio, Powell's paternal grandparents both had white and black ancestry. Her grandfather built boats and cabinets, and her grandmother was a seamstress. Powell talks about her maternal grandfather's courtship gift, a copy of the works of John Milton. Powell describes the inscription, as well as the Palmer Method of handwriting. Powell's father grew up on the campus of Alabama's Talladega College, where he attended elementary school through college. In Birmingham, his mother was an American Red Cross social worker, while his father taught woodworking to returning veterans. Powell's parents met at the local Congregational church, and married in 1936. In addition to raising her daughters, Powell's mother established Alabama's first licensed daycare.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Alma Powell's mother founded a daycare center in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1940s. She also became a director for Girl Scouts of the United States of America, establishing the first all-black troop as well as Camp Bessie McDowell in Marion, Alabama. Growing up, Powell camped with her family at integrated national parks in the Great Smoky Mountains, and attended Camp Pauline Bray Fletcher in Bessemer, Alabama. Powell recalls her childhood years during World War II, including the day Pearl Harbor was bombed and the sound of air raid sirens. In Birmingham, she lived in the middle class Enon Ridge community. There, her immediate family lived with her paternal grandfather and grandmother, who was domineering and strong-minded. Although she clashed with Powell's mother, she was very close to her son, Powell's father. Powell and her younger sister, Barbara Johnson Greene, had a persistent sibling rivalry. Her earliest memory is of staring into her sister's blue eyes while standing at the edge of her bassinet.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_001_004, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Alma Powell attended South Pratt School in Birmingham, Alabama, where she was promoted, completing the first through fourth grades in less than two years. She then attended Birmingham's Lincoln Elementary School, where her father was the principal. There, Powell developed her interest in theater, performing in the school's rendition of 'The Tempest.' From a young age, Powell felt disconnected from her community in Birmingham. Powell describes her childhood friend, Willa Yvonne Echols Hamilton, who lived in her neighborhood. The two sometimes dared one another to sit at the five and dime lunch counters, where, in part due to their fair complexions, they were never confronted. Powell talks about the decision to pass for white, the path that her paternal grandmother chose. When Powell was twelve years old, she entered the ninth grade at A.H. Parker High School, where her father was the principal. She graduated in January 1954, beginning her studies at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee the next month.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_001_005, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Alma Powell attended A.H. Parker High School in Birmingham, Alabama, where her father was the principal. Until her senior year, students wore uniforms to compensate for economic class differences. Her family was Congregationalist. While they rarely entertained, her mother was a member of Birmingham's Semper Fidelis Club. Given her limited social life, Powell looked forward to leaving Birmingham for college. Her parents decided that she would attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where, enrolling at the age of sixteen, she was one of the younger students. She was impressed by Fisk's students, who dressed nicely and were high achievers. Her classmates included David Levering Lewis and Hazel O'Leary, and Charles S. Johnson was president. Although some female students attended Fisk to look for a husband, Powell was motivated by her career aspirations. She majored in theater, studying with Lillian Voorhees and Gladys Ford. Her childhood friend left Fisk, as she prioritized socializing over studying.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_001_006, TRT: 0:30:35 ?

Alma Powell took summer courses at Western Reserve University in Cleveland where she met her first fiancée, although she broke off the engagement. She received her B.A. degree from Fisk University in 1957, then returned to Birmingham, where she hosted a radio program, 'Luncheon with Alma,' that featured global news about women. In 1958, she began her graduate studies in speech pathology and audiology at Boston's Emerson College, completing her clinical work at the VA hospital. At her dormitory on Beacon Street, she worked as the housemother's assistant to pay for her housing. She enjoyed exploring Boston, and interacted primarily with white students. Powell also met her husband, Colin L. Powell, and describes her early attraction to him. She recalls meeting his West Indian family, who were more fun-loving and more social than her own. From 1962, after they married, her husband served in Vietnam. Unable to find housing in segregated Fayetteville, North Carolina, Powell lived with their white military friends.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_001_007, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Alma Powell and her husband, General Colin L. Powell, were living at Fort Bragg, North Carolina during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Colin Powell was sent to Vietnam, while Powell returned to her parents' home in Birmingham. She was there when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed, and remembers the area known as Dynamite Hill. She also explains why students marched more often than adults in the Civil Rights Movement. While apart from her husband, Powell learned she was pregnant, and she struggled with their infrequent communication. When Colin Powell returned from Vietnam, they lived briefly in Phenix City, Alabama before he began courses at Fort Benning, Georgia. Living on base, Powell volunteered with the American Red Cross. After three years they moved to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where her husband attended the United States Army Command and General Staff College, graduating second in his class. During his second tour in Vietnam, Major General Charles M. Gettys recruited him to the 23rd Infantry Division.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_001_008, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Alma Powell and her children shared a house with her sister in Birmingham, Alabama while her husband, General Colin L. Powell served a second tour in Vietnam. When he returned to the United States in 1969, they moved to the Washington, D.C. area while Colin Powell attended George Washington University's M.B.A. program. There, the couple had their third child. Colin Powell began his Washington, D.C. career at The Pentagon, and entered the White House Fellows program in 1972. As a fellow, he worked at the Office of

Management and Budget, and traveled to the Soviet Union, Germany and China. That year, Powell met First Lady Pat Nixon at the White House. Colin Powell served in Korea for eighteen months, during a period of racial tension in the U.S. military. Powell stayed in Prince William County, where their children attended school year-round. At this point in the interview, she also talks about her husband's mentor, Brigadier General George B. Price, and her affiliation with the Independent Party.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_009, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Alma Powell's husband, General Colin L. Powell, was promoted to colonel in 1975 after serving in Korea, and attended the National War College in Washington, D.C. In 1976, they relocated to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where he was stationed as a commander. He served as senior military assistant to Charles Duncan, Jr., then as assistant to the deputy secretary of defense which brought him more recognition. While he wanted to return to the U.S. Army command, he served as assistant to the secretary of defense, Caspar W. Weinberger, for three years. During this time, Powell's accompanied her husband on his travels abroad. She often interacted with other wives of government officials, including Jane D. Weinberger. On one trip, she recalls leaving her daughter, Annemarie Powell Lyons, home in Virginia. After his work with Weinberger, General Colin Powell returned to Army service, and received his third star. Powell talks about the role of entertaining in the U.S. military, and socializing with the Army wives.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_010, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Alma Powell's husband, General Colin L. Powell, served as military assistant to Charles Duncan, Jr., deputy secretary of defense, during the Carter administration. In this position, he was among the first to be notified of military crises like the Iran hostage crisis. From 1982 to 1986, during Reagan's presidency, Colin Powell was military assistant to Caspar W. Weinberger. When her husband led the U.S. Army's V Corps in Germany, he earned his fourth star, and Powell joined a number of social clubs in Frankfurt. Their son, Michael Powell, was injured while serving in the U.S. Army's VII Corps, also in Germany. Powell remembers aiding her son's recovery, abroad as well as upon his return to Washington, D.C. Following the Iran-Contra Affair, President Reagan requested Colin Powell's return to the White House as Frank Carlucci's deputy of defense. He was soon appointed national security advisor. Powell recalls obtaining White House security clearance, and talks about the status of black servicemen.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_011, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Alma Powell's son, Michael Powell, was critically injured during his U.S. Army service in Germany. After a lengthy recovery, he was again able to walk; married his long-term girlfriend; and delivered a moving keynote address at The Pentagon. At this time, Powell's husband, General Colin L. Powell, served as national security advisor during President Ronald Reagan's administration. Powell comments on Reagan's leadership, including his political appointments, and the criticism of Nancy Reagan. As national security advisor, Colin Powell developed a supportive working relationship with Secretary of State George P. Shultz. With her husband, Powell traveled for the first time to the Soviet Union to prepare for the 1988 Moscow Summit between Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. She reflects upon the Cold War, as well as the unrest in the Middle East at the time of the interview. Powell explains the Goldwater-Nichols Act, which created the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairmanship, a position her husband held from 1989 to 1993.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_012, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Alma Powell relocated to Fort McPherson, Georgia for her husband, General Colin L. Powell's military career as four-star commander of the U.S. Armed Forces. They had two enlisted aides who were responsible for cooking and keeping house. After six months, Colin Powell was appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the principal advisor on military affairs for President George H.W. Bush's administration, which included Dick Cheney as secretary of defense. They returned to Washington, D.C., where, at Fort Myer, they lived at the chairman's house. At this point in the interview, Powell describes the military housing in Washington, D.C. The day Colin Powell became chairman, the U.S. invaded Panama. He also served as chairman during the Gulf War. Powell remembers the circumstances of the war, and talks about First Lady Laura Bush, whose confidence Powell admired. Powell also recalls attending a parade at Fort Campbell for the annual Reforger exercise where she was alarmed by the presence of a former Nazi officer.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_013, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Alma Powell's husband, General Colin L. Powell, served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during President George H.W. Bush's four-year term. Prior to the Gulf War, the Powells hosted General Mikhail A. Moiseyev and his wife, Galina Moiseyev, during their trip to America. Colin Powell befriended his former Soviet counterpart, and Powell gave his wife a tour of U.S. military bases, like Fort Drum in New York. There, Galina Moiseyev was impressed by the extent of the living quarters and the commissary. At the end of their trip, both expressed to Powell their respect for General Colin Powell. Powell talks about volunteerism's uniqueness to the United States, as many nations expect the government, not citizens, to provide aid. She also describes the mission of the Gulf War. Colin Powell continued to serve as chairman after President Bill Clinton succeeded Bush in 1992. Powell also talks about her husband being considered to campaign for the U.S. presidency, and describes the White House and The Pentagon.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_014, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Alma Powell's husband, General Colin L. Powell, retired from U.S. military service upon leaving the chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As President Bill Clinton prepared for reelection, Colin Powell was a rumored candidate for the Republican nomination, but he did not run. Instead, he promoted his autobiography, 'My American Journey,' on the speakers' circuit, and led America's Promise Alliance, a youth organization created by George W. Romney. In 1997, Colin Powell, the Alliance's founding chairman, hosted the President's Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia. Powell describes the organization, which focused on nationwide and community volunteerism relevant to youth issues. In response to the Alliance's diminished profile, Powell replaced Harris Wofford as chair in 2004. After President George W. Bush named him secretary of state, Colin Powell faced diplomatic challenges after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks. Powell describes Elayne Bennett's Best Friends Foundation.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_015, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Alma Powell's husband, General Colin L. Powell, became secretary of state in President George W. Bush's administration in 2000. He faced his first diplomatic challenge with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Powell reflects upon the country's failed leadership during this time, when the president, vice president and cabinet members were largely absent. She also talks about the proposed capture of Osama bin Laden, and Colin Powell's

credibility after his speech to the United Nations in 2003. Michael Powell also faced difficulty as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. After September 11, 2001, Powell and the cabinet wives established a chain of concern to support one another during crises. She also led group volunteer activities, such as to Martha's Table in Washington, D.C. In 2003, Powell authored two children's books, 'America's Promise' and 'My Little Wagon.' She describes her husband's disinterest in sightseeing, and reflects upon the future of her nonprofit America's Promise Alliance.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_016, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Alma Powell talks about the importance of community and individual support, irrespective of politics. She also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and shares her concern about the District of Columbia Public Schools. Powell names the SEED School of Washington, D.C. as a premier example of education that is both structured and expansive. She reflects upon the future of the family unit, in addition to her legacy. Powell also narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Alma Powell, Section A2006_009_002_017, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Alma Powell narrates her photographs.