

Adam Clayton Powell: The Hidden Hero of Civil Rights

On a warm July 2nd, the White House was extraordinarily hectic; the East Room flooded with influential people such as civil rights activists Martin Luther King Jr and Roy Wilkins, and members of Congress like Hubert Humphery and Everett Dirksen as they sit in anticipation of President Johnson (“Civil Rights Act of 1964”). In just moments, he will sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law, changing the very foundation of America to finally deliver on its belief that all men are created equal by abolishing segregation. To his right were all the people he worked with to advance the civil rights movement(LBJ Civil Rights Act crowd). Among them, congressman Adam Clayton Powell watches the president sign his proposed amendment to the bill, the Powell Amendment, which deprived schools that still incorporated segregation of financial aid (“Powell’s Amendments”). After the continuous work that Powell put into passing it, followed by rejection and criticism, the Powell Amendment will see its light of day. His journey was long and hard, but his efforts are what ended up filling school hallways with faces of all colors and origins today.

John F. Kennedy finds that people do not exemplify political courage in fear of “the risks to their careers, the unpopularity of their courses, the defamation of their characters, and [...] the vindication of their reputations and their principles” (Kennedy, 21). Powell’s very career is the definition of political courage; as an African American fighting for equality during the Civil Rights Movement, he received disapproval for his ambition for change. Considering how Powell was also a Congressman, he had the pressure of not getting reelected, but the fear of losing his career or his reputation did not stop him from advancing civil rights through laws and protests and breaking the unjust barrier based on skin color. He began as a “Harlem community activist,” and his first achievement was that “he successfully organized and led peaceful boycotts to force

white businesses in Harlem to hire blacks for management and professional positions”(Mack). Over the years, Powell moved up the occupational ladder and became the “first African American elected to Congress from New York” (Hicks) as a member of the House of Representatives, but never gave up his identity and beliefs for the sake of his occupation or reputation.

Powell was said to have the “most militant voice in the Negro’s struggle for equality” even though he held a government position(“Organizations and Leaders Campaigning for Negro Goals in the United States” 16). He always supported the presidential candidate who exemplified the most progressive action towards civil rights despite his party. In 1956, Powell “infuriated his party by influencing his supporters to support Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower” because he saw him as “mildly progressive on civil rights,” and did the same in 1960 for President Kennedy (“Who was Adam Clayton Powell Jr.?”). He dealt with the risk of losing his position solely by protesting against segregation and supporting those that did the same. However, his most controversial act of protest was creating the Powell Amendment, but it became one of the most monumental legislative steps towards racial integration in America.

President Eisenhower proposed a “\$1.6 million school construction bill” in 1956, where Adam Clayton Powell first proposed his Powell Amendment. Although it was for the better of America and civil rights, the South and newspapers critiqued his proposal, and it is even regarded today as a killer amendment, a term used to describe an amendment that is the reason for the failure of an otherwise successful bill(Jenkins, 499). Powell’s main reason for proposing the amendment was “that no federal money should be spent on segregated school programs because such construction would invite Southern districts to circumvent the law”(“The Powell Amendment”). The issue with including it into the bill was how it would be “driving away

southern Democratic votes” within the Senate, even if the House of Representatives passed the final bill(Pollack). The situation forced Powell into a position where he had to withdraw his amendment or else schools across America would not receive any funding; he then “ agreed to stop advancing them when President Kennedy took office,” appearing as if Powell lost his ability to push legislative action against civil rights.

As time went on, Powell decided to announce that he will “start introducing his ‘discrimination amendments’ to welfare bills once again” in 1963 during the Kennedy administration, but he received criticism that his amendments bring “nothing but trouble” (“Powell’s Amendments”). His main obstacle was the South because as much as he would push for the addition of his Powell Amendment, “no Southerner can vote for the bill”(“Powell’s Amendments”). However, he revealed his motive behind “resuming the amendment game is a hope of irritating the President into taking some positive action against segregation,” showing that he was still fighting for the abolishment of segregation(“Powell’s Amendments”). His chance to make a change arose once more when President Johnson began working with civil rights activists and the Congress to create a new civil rights bill.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the definitive law that “ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race [and] color” and is considered as “one of the crowning legislative achievements of the civil rights movement”(“Civil Rights Act of 1964). Adding the Powell Amendment into the bill ensured students a racially integrated environment, which Powell believed to be impossible without its inclusion. He claimed that “if the Civil Rights Bill is passed in its entirety [...] it would not affect the black revolution in the north one bit”(Clayton). The interests of the North were more towards “schools, housing, and jobs”(Clayton); the Powell Amendment helped to create change in one of the categories, and

President Johnson saw the potential in it. With the help of Adam Clayton Powell and other civil rights activists, July 2nd, 1964 marked the beginning of a more equal America.

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