



## ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY, INC:

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### **Praise Song for Colin Powell**

When I think of the passing of Colin Powell on October 18, 2021, my heart is filled with a gnawing sadness at the loss of this great man and yet also filled with profound appreciation for his life of service to our country. Perhaps not strange at all, my thoughts about his death are interrupted by Langston Hughes' famous poem "I, Too," and the even more famous first verse "I, too, sing America," which rings out in my mind, as if a praise song for General Powell.

Colin Powell believed firmly in equality and justice for all—ideals long professed in word and in song, but not nearly enough lived up to in America. The child of Jamaican immigrants, he took pride in knowing that America constituted a nation of immigrants, and he once described his parents in an interview in 2015 as "two of the best citizens you'll ever see in the history of this country." His father came to the U.S. on a banana boat and with very little money, Powell would recall in his autobiography *My American Journey* (1995). His parents built a family and larger community rich in love and perseverance. He described growing up in "the warmth and security of the concentric circles my family formed." In the poem, "I, Too," Langston Hughes put it this way, "But I laugh/And eat well/ And grow strong," despite the reality of racial discrimination.

I cannot help but think of General Colin Powell, as my memory wanders back to the year 2018 and to ASALH's annual Black History theme--"African Americans in Times of War." I pause to remember the ASALH programs at the national and local branch levels, and especially our events in collaboration with the Vietnam War Commemoration's Partner Program. We featured moving ceremonies in which VWC pins were presented to all in our audience who served in the military between the years 1955 and 1980. Although General Powell was not present at our events, I knew that he had emerged from that war with such distinction as to become an advisor to presidents, Republican and Democrat alike, starting with the Reagan administration through that of Barack Obama. In fact, Colin Powell, as Secretary of State under George W. Bush, became the first African American to operate at the highest levels of geopolitics worldwide. And suddenly again, the verses of Langston Hughes come to mind, as though a prophetic assertion of Powell's later prominence: "Tomorrow, I'll be at the table/When company comes."

When I think of Colin Powell, I am inspired by his words in *It Worked for Me* (2012): "Life and leadership can't be about *me*. They have to be about *us*. They have to be about people." His sentiments lead me to ponder the promise of America and the never-ending quest for a more perfect union. He stands out for both his courage and humility in my praise song. Nor did Powell shy away from a critical assessment of himself, as evidenced in his reflections on his UN speech in 2003 regarding the Iraq war—a speech he characterized as "one of my most momentous failures." While conscious of this "blot" on his record, Powell also emphasized the importance of moving on, while never forgetting the lessons learned.

History will remember this giant of a soldier and statesman, beloved by his family, his friends, his nation, and world. Besides, we saw how beautiful he was and how unashamedly he could conclude, like Langston Hughes "I, too, am America." Colin Powell was America at its best.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham  
ASALH National President

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### **ASALH MISSION**

*To promote, research, preserve, interpret, and disseminate information about Black Life, history and culture to the global community*