The Caribbean roots of Powell's decision.

THE CULTURE OF CAUTION

By Orlando Patterson

There is a line in Colin Powell's autobiography that says much about the culture that nurtured him. He is describing the reaction of his relatives to the news that he had changed his college major from engineering to geology. What good was that, they wished to know. "And, most critical to these security-haunted people, could geology lead to a pension?"

Colin Powell knew his people. West Indians in general, and Jamaicans in particular, are more than normally obsessed with security. "Dread" is a feared and favored word in modern Jamaican creole, describing a chronic existential insecurity. And it is this dread which may account for Powell's decision not to seek the presidency. In understanding Powell's extreme caution, his West Indian immigrant background cannot be overestimated.

The Caribbean islands presented to their inhabitants a succession of challenges that instilled a sense of constant insecurity. Not only are the islands dirt poor and overpopulated but their history has been one of the most brutal in modern times, an endless series of harsh challenges. Some were man-made: slavery, the post-emancipation plantation system, the eroded peasant hillsides. Others were simply acts of god, like the volcanoes, earthquakes and hurricanes that periodically flatten or burn everything in sight, sometimes pulling whole cities undersea. To the natives, these islands were never paradise.

But they were home. The challenge to survive in these tiny, overcrowded hothouses of peoples from every corner of the world resulted in an archipelago of homelands, fiercely loved, and as fiercely loathed, eagerly departed from and obsessively longed for by exiles living in overcrowded Northern tenements smelling of rum, curried goat and coconuts. More than most other peoples, West Indians belong to a migratory culture—a continuing migration that has increased with time and inevitably focused on the United States.

There have been two great movements of West Indians to America. The first began over 100 years ago, with more than 95,000 migrants arriving during the second half of the century, many via Panama, where mainly Jamaican and Barbadian workers constructed the canal. It escalated during the first three decades of this century, when 290,000 came, but was severely curtailed by the racist immigration law of 1924. During the next thirty years, an average of fewer than 2,000 arrived annually. This first wave defined the American image of Caribbeans, and Colin Powell is its ultimate success story.

These early immigrants came mainly from lower-middle and solidly working-class backgrounds. Powell's fit this pattern: his father was working class, and his mother's high-school background would have placed her firmly in the middle class at a time when less than 2 percent of Jamaicans had such education. Their light-brown complexion, another index of middle-class status, was also typical of those early immigrants.

The second West Indian wave arrived in the 1960s and continues to this day. The Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act of 1965 came in the nick of time for West Indian migratory culture. Only three years earlier Britain had closed its doors, blocking a growing movement by the West Indian working classes to the former metropole. The pent-up migratory force broke on America right after. By the late '60s, Jamaica alone was sending more than 10,000 people per annum. Between 1960 and 1993 a total of 845,588 arrived, 57 percent from Jamaica.

West Indians of the second wave are more complex in social origin than their predecessors. They come mainly from the two extremes of the islands' talent pool: the most and the least able. The upwardly mobile working poor have largely stayed put as the modernization of the islands' economies has opened up opportunities at the top of West Indian society. Since colonial elites no longer block internal mobility as they did in the 1920s, talented lower-middle-class and working-class people can now move into the upper middle class instead of emigrating. The very brightest people, however, still find the smallness and confinement of the islands a severe constraint on their ambitions, so they leave to swim in bigger ponds. At the same time, modern mass transportation has considerably reduced the cost of migration as well as its selective pressure, so peo-

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ple at the bottom of the society who find little prospect of work at home also move out. This new flow's two extremes are reflected in the fact that the post-'60s migration has, on the one hand, presented America with numerous professors, doctors, nurses, businessmen and two Nobel laureates but, on the other hand, has produced the murderous savagery of the posse gangs now taking over the nation's crack trade.

The starker difference between the old and the new immigrant waves is that the older generation were better placed educationally vis-à-vis the American black population. While the current wave of migrants have spent a couple more years in school, West Indian primary education has deteriorated since colonial days, and the prewar immigrants, who averaged eleven years of school attendance, actually enjoyed a larger advantage over American blacks. Today, African Americans have actually surpassed immigrant West Indians in years of schooling.

Moreover, the first cohort of immigrants found an America immensely different from today's. Powell's parents entered a highly segregated society. Because of the tight housing market faced by all blacks, West Indians had to live among the African American population. In this, they differed greatly from European immigrants, who established distinct ethnic neighborhoods. But this does not mean, as some have argued, that West Indians became an "invisible" group, forced to assimilate into black America. They were all too visible to the native African American population that both resented and were intrigued by their pushiness, their intellectualism, their strange ways of talking, dressing and dancing. And they were very visible to the whites who quickly stereotyped them as more adaptable and hardworking than native-born blacks.

More educated than American blacks and, like all immigrants, motivated and driven, these early West Indians quickly monopolized the role of intermediary between whites and African Americans. In the early decades of the twentieth century, black Americans remained generally hostile to the Democratic Party, and by the late '30s and '40s it was West Indians who cracked the racist walls around Tammany Hall and came to represent blacks in mainstream electoral politics. These included J. Raymond Jones, the first black to lead the Tammany machine; Bertram Baker, New York's first black state assemblyman; and MacDonald "Mac" Holder, Brooklyn's preeminent power broker for over half a century. Observers usually credit this political action to the newcomers' Afro-British heritage, and there is something to this. The British, because of their small numbers in the islands, always needed a buffer between themselves and the unusually rebellious mass of blacks. So, from the days of slavery, the "colored" middle groups developed a racial broker tradition, one which they may well have transported to America. (In any case, the West Indian experience in the U.S. fits a larger pattern. Small outsider groups have historically played an intermediary role in tightly segregated plural societies. For example, a disproportionate number of African leaders have come from small tribes. And the Chinese minority played the same buffer role in Malaysia and Indonesia until the larger native groups woke up politically and booted them out.)

In America, native blacks woke up to mainstream politics in the '60s and gave the West Indians the boot. But West Indians of the first wave influenced radical black politics and cultural life as well, giving voice to the pent-up rage of African Americans against the racist system. They owned New York's leading black newspaper, and many West Indians influenced the Harlem renaissance, the Jamaican Claude McKay being the most famous. Another Jamaican, Marcus Garvey, led the first mass movement of urban black Americans through his separatist, back-to-Africa group, the Universal Negro Improvement Association. And up to the mid-'40s nearly all prominent black communists and labor leaders were West Indian. The late, great West Indian intellectual C.L.R. James was for several years America's leading Trotskyite theoretician, working under the pseudonym J.R. Johnson.

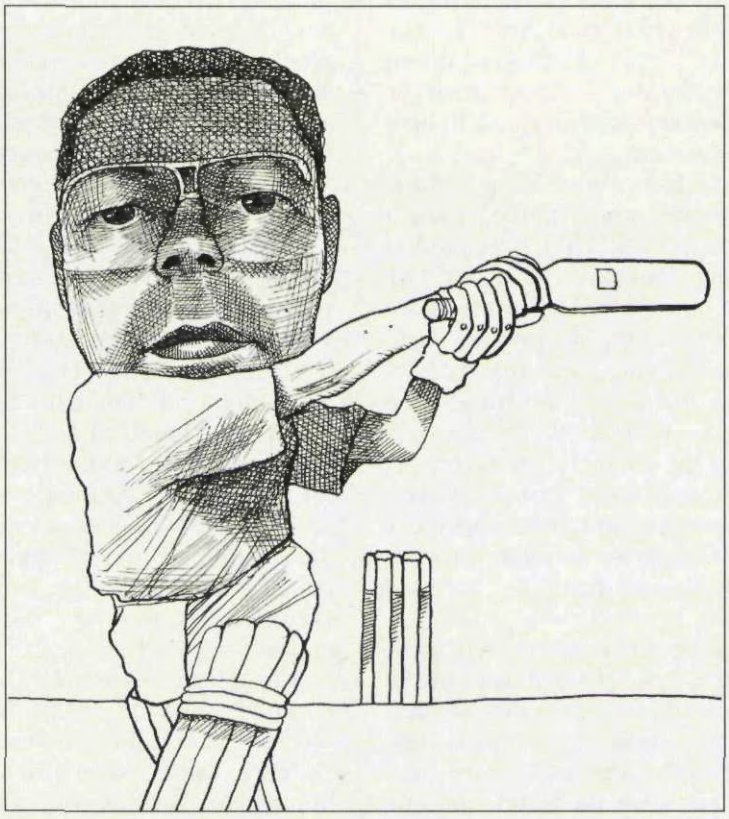
The West Indian cultural background helps to explain this radical legacy. Caribbean radicalism has roots in an endless series of slave revolts, a tradition continued after emancipation in the great peasant revolt in Jamaica in 1865 and the plantation riots of the 1930s. Partly this was due to the majority status of blacks in the islands and their greater sense of racial dignity. But, ironically, it was also due to the limited but unwittingly subversive nature of British colonial education itself. The British not only relied on a cadre of trained blacks to man the lower ranks of the civil service and teaching profession in the Caribbean but, with classic imperial nerve, singled out West Indians—especially Barbadians—to act as teachers, missionaries and lower-level imperial agents in colonial Africa. This strategy resembled their use of small Asian groups in the pacification of Southeast Asia.

The technique worked well enough in Africa, but it backfired in the Caribbean. Not only did radical strains in British thought take root among West Indian intellectuals like C.L.R. James, but the imperial mystique itself was absorbed and turned on its head. The grandiosity of Marcus Garvey, who, in his British Raj costume and Victorian feathered hat, planned to take African Americans on what was, in essence, an imperial conquest of Africa, was, in the sublimely absurd custom of the islands, simply a West Indian saturnalia gone awry, in which the colonial mimic decided to live his role for real.

These two great traditions of West Indian politics—the moderate interracial broker and the militant racialist invert—are apotheosized in Colin Powell and Louis Farrakhan. It is no accident that Farrakhan's first career was that of a calypsonian called "The Charmer." (Given Powell's lifelong love of calypso it is not unlikely that he once saw Farrakhan perform on a calypso stage.) Calypso is the essence of the Carnival, the music

of inversion. Farrakhan's social conservatism and inordinate pride in his half-learned classical violin are pure Anglo West Indian, his plans for the resurrection of black patriarchy represent male West Indian compensation against the Caribbean's formidably independent women, and his mystifying numerology comes straight out of the West Indian preaching tradition. And, when Farrakhan reaches for a religious metaphor, it is not to the Koran that he turns but, compulsively, to the book drummed into his subconscious as a youth: the Bible—King James edition.

Given the subjective definition of ancestry, it is hard to say how many West Indians live in the United States today. The sociologist Mary Waters, a leading researcher on Caribbeans in the U.S., suspects that the less successful, especially the troubled offspring of more recent, proletarian migrants to the inner cities, are more inclined to identify themselves as black Americans. And we have no good estimate of the large number of undocumented West Indians. A highly conservative recent estimate suggests that, as of 1990, at least 6 percent of the black population—approximately 2 million persons—are of black, non-Hispanic, Caribbean origin, of whom 86 percent are foreign born. One can safely increase this figure by a third to take account of the large number of illegal migrants, as well as temporary farm workers and documented non-migrants, many of whom end up as illegal residents. This high ratio of foreign to native born reflects the immigrant flow's rapid increase over the past three decades. It stands in sharp contrast to the final decades of the first wave, during which American-born West Indians such as Powell constituted about half of all those claiming Caribbean ancestry.



COLIN POWELL BY JOHN SPRINGS FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

About two-thirds of American blacks of island ancestry come from the Anglophone West Indies, Jamaicans being by far the single largest group (29 percent). Haitians now rank second (19 percent) and those from the Hispanic Caribbean third (16 percent). Because they are among the most highly concentrated populations in the United States, West Indians represent a major component of the black population in states like New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts. Almost half of all blacks from the Caribbean live in New York, making up 30 percent of the state's black population; the second-largest group, some 17 percent, lives in Florida; 7 percent are in New England, mainly Massachusetts, where they make up nearly a third of the state's black population. In all, over 80 percent live in the New England, Middle Atlantic and South Atlantic regions.

Is there any truth to the common view that they represent a black success story? According to the black conservative Thomas Sowell, not only is their success well attested to by the Census data, it is evidence that racism insufficiently explains African Americans' economic plight. Rather, in Sowell's view, their West Indian attitudes and values—hard work, familism, love of education, all celebrated in Powell's autobiography—provide the explanation.

Sowell's thesis has generated heated debate. All sorts of statistical maneuvers have been marshaled by the "Racism-Forever" cadre of social scientists to prove that there is no exception to the iron grip of race in American life. According to economist Kristin Butcher, the proper comparison group for West Indians is not the average African American but only those blacks who have migrated from one state to another (as if nearly all African Americans were not already internal migrants). This done, the West Indian advantage vanishes. Racism's got them, too! The demographer Suzanne Model, however, although sympathetic to the argument, could not replicate Butcher's claim. Her view is that West Indians, especially those of the second and third generations, historically earned much more than other African Americans. This she explains partly by their unusually high rates of labor force participation (especially among immigrant women) and partly by their greater number of years in school. But, by 1990, African Americans in New York had closed both the income and educational gaps: the racism model still worked.

The problem with the racism model, however, is that its findings apply only to New York in aggregate, and, given the extremely heterogeneous nature of the West Indian populations there today, generalizations are

highly questionable. West Indians of the first wave, such as those who live in Queens and in the Williamsbridge-Wakefield area of the Bronx where Powell grew up, continue to be solidly middle class, and their children are found disproportionately in the best public schools. Children of the new wave, whose parents come disproportionately from the lowest end of West Indian societies, are disproportionately found in the city's worst schools and, as a result, suffer the same problems that plague their African American underclass peer group.

The best recent study of the national data, done by Dutch sociologist Matthijs Kalmijn, unequivocally argues that West Indians in America *have* experienced disproportionate success. Far from assimilating to African American disadvantage, as the Racism-Forever analysts claim, Kalmijn shows that West Indians continue to have substantially higher annual incomes, more prestigious jobs, considerably greater returns to schooling than African Americans and on many indices practically reach a par with whites.

Sowell, therefore, has his facts about West Indians right. But his explanation is still questionable. It is not mainly the home-country values of West Indians that account for their economic success: otherwise the islands would be economic miracles. What counts is the highly selective nature of the migration process itself. Powell is right to attribute his own, and his group's, success to the ethic of work and family. But his parents were exceptional Jamaicans—both in the values they held and in the strength of their commitment to them—and it was these exceptional Jamaicans who continually chose to migrate. Those left behind tell a different story: Jamaican family life is today in even greater trouble than is African American.

Do these values that produce success still exist among the post-'60s wave of Caribbean immigrants? Philip Kasinitz, who recently studied West Indians in New York, has an attractive account of what is taking place. The new wave came just as formal segregation laws were abolished, opening up many residential areas previously denied to blacks. The result has been the rapid growth of West Indian neighborhoods very similar, in his view, to the classic old Euro-American ethnic communities. Ironically, just as the West Indians became a major demographic presence in the city, they lost their grip on mainstream city politics as African Americans took over that role. Instead, argues Kasinitz, West Indians are increasingly turning to classic ethnic politics. A new breed of politicians represents distinctly West Indian—as opposed to African American—interests. While West Indian politicians in the first wave deliberately muted their West Indianness in their public life, they now emphasize it in order to mobilize this rapidly growing ethnic turf.

It's certainly true that some West Indian activists are now desperately trying to replicate the familiar American ethnic route to local political power. But I don't think they stand a chance of success. This is not because West Indians are inherently skeptical of politicians as Kasinitz and others argue; they are doing a pretty good job of it in England, and the new wave of immigrants come, if anything, from politically overheated democratic polities seemingly ripe for ethnic mobilization. But rather, current migration takes place in a radically new context which largely obviates the need for ethnic politics.

This context—call it the West Atlantic system—is thoroughly enmeshing the fate of the Caribbean with that of the United States. It is itself merely one part of America's transformation into a global, post-industrial polity. The West Atlantic system is a circular flow of social, demographic and economic forces embracing the Caribbean archipelago and the eastern United States. The flow of American capital, technology and mass culture to the islands, far from promoting self-sustained national development—as was once innocently hoped—has thoroughly disrupted their traditional economies and cultures and is, in fact, the main reason for the current mass migration to America. The sad truth is that these island economies are, in the long run, simply not viable—they are too small, too poor in natural resources and too close to America's overwhelming post-industrial culture. They are, de facto, already part of NAFTA, and it's only a matter of time before they are de jure.

But the people of the Caribbean aren't waiting. In the migratory process, they have created a wholly new set of human communities: genuinely transnational social systems that exist equally in both the U.S. and the Caribbean. West Indian culture, especially that of Jamaica and Barbados, can no longer be identified exclusively with the islands. Instead, it is post-national—found partly in New York, partly in Florida and to a lesser extent in Toronto. People move freely between these different locations while remaining within a transnational community. And they move at all levels. West Indian elites are endlessly mobile, with homes and bank accounts all over the West Atlantic, and the West Indian peasantry is easily the most-traveled lower class on earth. Peasant higglers and hawkers who only a decade or so ago bartered yams and sweet potatoes now think nothing of pooling their resources, chartering a plane and flying off to Florida, Panama or Hong Kong to buy their merchandise, which they then sell in any of Jamaican culture's different enclaves—either in North America or on the island itself.

This post-national context renders old models of ethnic community and politics irrelevant to West Indians living in the U.S. Caribbean Americans have seen the coming of the global economy as clear as the waters of Negril and, molded by historical insecurity into masters of survival, they have positioned themselves a step ahead of the game. Did Colin Powell's decision to eschew the siren song of electoral politics result from a similar survival instinct? Maybe it was the West Indian in him. •