

Black **H**istory **M**onth

Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

By Janus Adams

It seemed the end of the Civil Rights-era "second Reconstruction" had come even before it had fully begun. On March 1, 1967, by a vote of 307 to 116, the House of Representatives expelled Harlem's Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Charged with high absenteeism and defaming the character of a known "bag woman" (numbers runner), the fiery Powell had long been a thorn in the Establishment's Achilles' heel, and the House seized upon the opportunity afforded by his mishaps.

Powell just wouldn't be a "Negro." Well-educated, he was uppity and unapologetic, handsome and charismatic. He loved the nightlife almost as much as his day job as an activist/reformer. A man of privilege, he led the Depression-era "Buy-Where-You-Can-Work" Boycott on segregated stores in Harlem. His celebrity marriage to jazz singer/pianist Hazel Scott caused a stir, so did his sermons as one of the most riveting Baptist preacher/orators of his day. As the first northern black congressman, he refused to demure in the face of segregation; rejecting racial bans on House facilities, he encouraged his staff to do the same. Best of all, his Committee on Education and Labor passed more major legislation than any other committee in the House. Desegregating the military, ending Jim Crow travel, a new child welfare law, upgrading the minimum wage, Manpower: all these were credited to Powell. Born forty three years after Emancipation, he was the grandson of a slave. At the age of ten, he saw his grandfather's slave brand. That memory had motivated him for life. Six weeks after Powell's expulsion, Harlem returned him to Congress. The special election established the right of a district - and of a people, given the fact that there were only five African Americans in this pre-Voting Rights-era Congress-to choose its own leaders. By 1969, the Supreme Court concurred. But the damage had been done. Powell (and a nation of underrepresented blacks) had lost his seniority, his committee chairmanship, and his place in line of succession to the presidency. A twenty-four-year veteran and the ranking majority leader, he had been third in line.



In 1937, Powell succeeded his father, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., as pastor of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. Powell was elected to the city council and went on to the House of Representatives in 1945.

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