

By Elaina Loveland

## International Statesman

An interview with former U.S. Secretary of State  
General Colin Powell

**G**ENERAL COLIN L. POWELL, FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE, addressed the opening plenary session of the 2007 NAFSA Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Prior to the conference, Powell spent some time with Elaina Loveland, *IE*'s managing editor, discussing his views on international education, globalization, and a host of other topics.

*Before becoming secretary of state, Powell served as a key aide to the secretary of defense and as national security advisor to President Reagan. He also served 35 years in the United States Army, rising to the rank of four-star general and serving as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1989–1993). During this time he oversaw 28 crises including the Panama intervention of 1989 and Operation Desert Storm in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.*

*Powell was born in 1937 in New York City to Jamaican immigrants and was raised in South Bronx, New York. He was educated in the New York City public schools, and attended the City College of New York (CCNY), where he earned a bachelor's degree in geology. He also participated in ROTC at CCNY and received a commission as an Army second lieutenant upon graduation in June 1958. He later earned a master of business administration from George Washington University.*

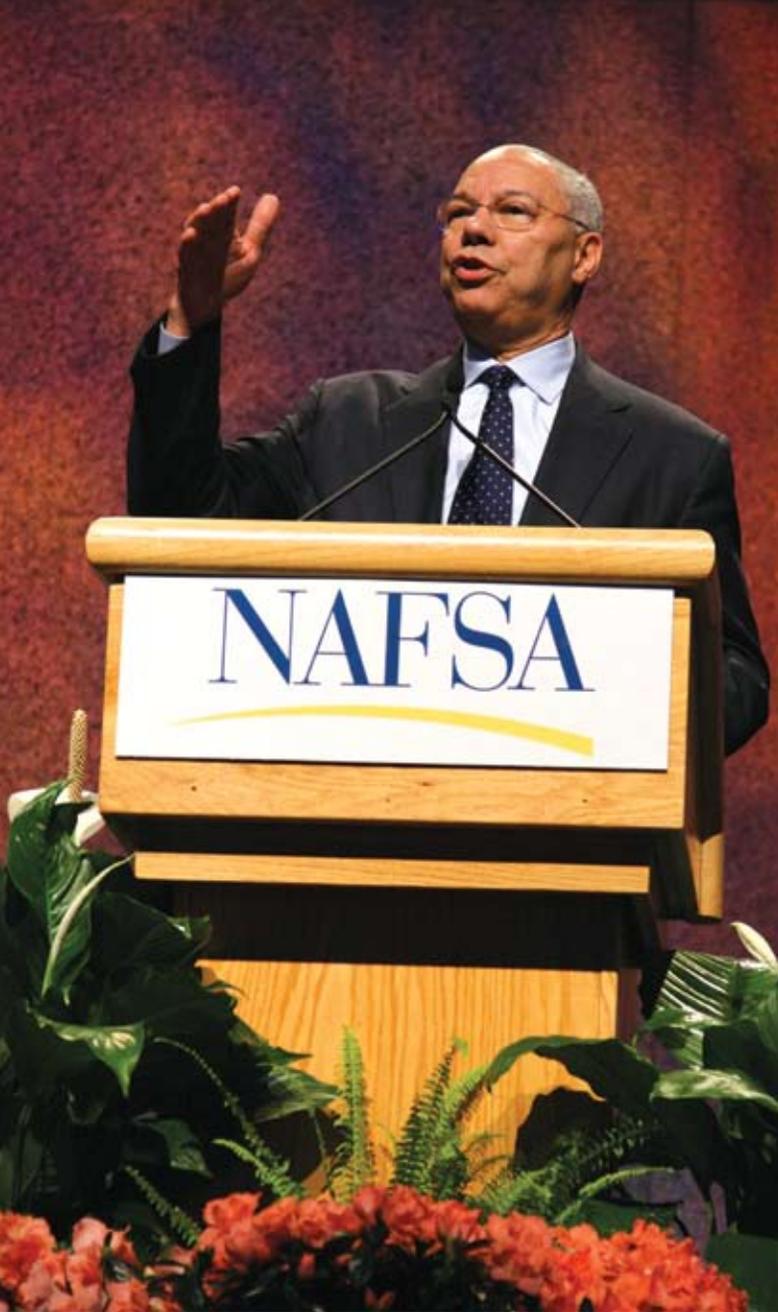
*Powell has earned many U.S. military decorations and numerous civilian awards including two Presidential Medals of Freedom, the President's Citizens Medal, the Congressional Gold Medal, and the 2004 J. William Fulbright Prize for International Understanding. He has received awards from over two-dozen countries including a French Legion of Honor and an honorary knighthood bestowed by Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain.*

*Powell was the founding chairman of America's Promise: The Alliance for Youth. Since returning to pri-*

*vate life, Powell has become a strategic limited partner at Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield & Byers, a Silicon Valley venture capital firm. He is the Founder of the Colin Powell Policy Center at CCNY and he is helping to raise funds for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C. and for the construction of an education center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Powell is the author of his bestselling autobiography, My American Journey.*

**IE:** International education comes in many shapes and sizes—study abroad, foreign students and scholars contributing to learning on U.S. campuses, programs like the Fulbright Program, and other academic exchanges. How do these programs collectively influence public diplomacy?

**POWELL:** I think they are very important. We have no greater diplomats than people going back and forth sharing their cultures and perspectives. This is especially important with young people and so I am a great supporter of international education programs—and I am not a “Johnny come lately” to it. It’s not just something that occurred to me while I was secretary of state—it’s something I’ve had a lifelong interest in. It might be a surprise to hear this but it goes back to my time as a young soldier when I was a captain at Fort Benning, Georgia, and as a major in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where I was exposed to officers from other countries who came to our military schools. In 1964, as a young captain, I sat with students from Libya—I



General Colin L. Powell

was the adviser to an officer from Libya at that time—he would come to my house for dinner and his farewell gift to me when he went back to Libya was a copy of the Koran, which I still have in my personal collection. And then at Fort Leavenworth in 1967 to 1968, I got to know a lot of overseas visitors who were serving at Fort Leavenworth and it went beyond sitting in class with us.

Each foreign student at Leavenworth was adopted by one of the people in the town of Leavenworth. On Thanksgiving and on weekends they would go and spend time with these townspeople. These relationships paid off in such great measures in later years. I remember so many officers who I met in subsequent years when I became a general. The first thing they would say to me was, “Do you know so and so who was at Leavenworth? He was my sponsor while I was there.” So, they would leave the United States with a much better feeling about who we are, what kind of a people we are having lived with us, and I see that repeated in so many different ways today with our civilian exchange programs and still with our

military exchange programs. So I think that these kinds of exchange programs are very important to public diplomacy and our foreign policy objectives and I am a strong supporter of them.

**IE:** What key challenges does the United States face in the twenty-first century that could be tempered by knowledge gained through international education experiences?

**POWELL:** Every challenge and everything that is happening now is happening in a world that is increasingly flat as my friend Tom Friedman says, author of *The World Is Flat*. We now live in a world where information flows at the speed of light—a world that is globalized. All of the boundaries that used to keep people behind iron—all those curtains and constraints of exchange are now gone. Information moves much more rapidly by satellite, by television, by the Internet—you name it—and in that environment, which is very challenging, you still have a need for this point-to-point connection between human beings who don’t just watch television or read an e-mail but who stay with each other, who live with each other, who get to know one another, who get to talk to each other long into the evening. There is no substitute for that in a world that is as diverse as today’s world.

What challenges do we face? I would rather look at the opportunities we have to further understanding with people around the world and look at the opportunities we have to learn about the problems and thinking of other people in the world at the same time they learn more about us. So it deals with just about every opportunity and every challenge we have and I wouldn’t want to single any out, but I think that this kind of exchange helps us in a positive way across the entire range of opportunities and challenges.

**IE:** How do you think international education and exchange can improve intercultural understanding and foster peace in other nations?

**POWELL:** As secretary of state, I supervised the Fulbright program and many other people-to-people programs. I encouraged greater use of short exchange programs where we bring foreign students to the United States just for a two-week period and they didn’t have to be college students, they could have been high school students. Any time people can talk to one another, you have the opportunity to improve international understanding. As secretary of state and as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I was something of an exchange program myself. Whenever I would go to a town or city overseas, I would try—after my formal meetings with heads of state government—to see if there was a group of young people who I could talk to. At that moment, when I walked into a small auditorium or into a classroom,



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and sat down with young people, we were in fact, having an exchange program. And I will always remember vividly a visit to a high school in Berlin after unification. It was in the city’s eastern section that used to be communist. I went in and sat down and for the first 20 minutes, the students just wanted to argue with me about various U.S. foreign policies that they were not happy with. I took all of their questions and let them get it out of their system. But at about the twenty-first minute suddenly they asked, “How are things in the United States now? How does a black person become secretary of state? What challenges did you face as a young person?” Suddenly we weren’t arguing about foreign policy—we weren’t arguing at all. Instead we were discussing issues of mutual concern and we were educating each other.

**IE: The number of students participating in international exchanges has increased in recent years. Does this reflect a growing understanding of the impact of student exchanges and how do you believe exchanges benefit education and ultimately, society?**

**POWELL:** I think it reflects greater opportunity for study abroad in absence of a Cold War environment. I think it reflects increasing wealth in the world that allows people to undertake education in other parts of the world not just in their own countries and I think it reflects the desire on the part of young people to broaden their horizons and broaden their experience. I’m glad the numbers are going up.

At the college level, we had a problem right after September 11, 2001, and we had to undertake some actions, which cut back on visas, student visas especially, and I had every college president writing me about it and I told them all to “write to me, please complain to me so I can use your complaints to put pressure on the system and speed up the issuance of visas and clearances.” So I’m glad to see the numbers now getting back up. The other thing that was important to me is the simple fact that we are now competing in a global environment for foreign students. Foreign students don’t have to come to the United States. They can get a quality education in this globalized world in Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and many other countries. So, it’s important for us to encourage the inflow of students from overseas and, at the same time, U.S. citizens are no longer living in the Cold War environment where they had to study other countries just as a matter of national security—we no longer live in that kind of environment and our young people do not have that same kind of exposure to foreign policies of other countries and so exchange programs or studying abroad I think compensates for that change in environment.

**IE: What is your most memorable moment when you realized the power that international education experiences can create positive change in not just citizens’ lives but on a greater scale?**

**POWELL:** I came into senior levels of government already understanding this and believing this. I didn’t have a “eureka moment.” I knew it from my early days as a soldier when I met students from Nigeria, Libya, Europe, Asia, Africa, and all over the world. As early as the age of 24 I was exposed to this kind of experience and I stayed in touch with many of these people for over 40 years.

**IE: As the son of immigrants, you are often cited as a prime example of living the American dream. What are your opinions on welcoming immigrants to the U.S. to pursue their education and possibly, their own American dream?**

**POWELL:** I am a great believer in immigration. My parents came here loving the country they left, Jamaica. But they didn’t have the opportunities they needed in Jamaica to be successful in life. So they came here, became Americans, raised two children—one a teacher, one a soldier—loved their adopted country. My experience isn’t unique. It’s the American story. We are a nation that touches every nation and in turn, we are touched by every nation. And we are enriched by immigration and what makes America so unique is that we can take in all of these immigrants and even though there are difficulties and we have to struggle with immigration policy, for the most part, we can assimilate our immigrant population perhaps better than any country in the world. It’s always been a source of joy for me to watch and to talk about it as I go around the world. So I believe in immigration, it keeps this country alive and well and frankly, it compensates for other demographic difficulties we might have, which European nations have, but they don’t have that flow of immigrants to keep the population up, to keep the population diverse and contribute to the country.

**IE: After the events of September 11, 2001, the issue of visas for foreign students came under scrutiny. As secretary of state during this critical point in recent U.S. history, how did you deal with the challenge of trying to improve foreign relations by keeping doors open to foreign students while simultaneously addressing the concerns of U.S. citizens?**

**POWELL:** The first responsibility the government has is to protect its citizens. We discovered we had deficiencies in our law enforcement databases, in our intelligence databases and we had problems with our visa system that had to be fixed. That was first responsibility we had to the American people. But as we improved these things we also slowed down the issuance of visas. We were not happy about the situation with our airports when students were coming in and the visa was slightly out of order and so they were sent back home. So we improved the security of our system but we communicated to the rest of the world that we weren’t as welcoming as we used to be. We



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then started to reverse that about a year and a half after September 11, 2001. I went to the president and said, “We really don’t want to create an impression to the rest of the world that we don’t welcome them. We want them here. It helps us. It helps us take our case to the rest of the world.” So things have been getting better but it’s still not as good as it should be and I hope improvement will continue with the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security.

**IE:** In your book, *My American Journey*, you distilled your thoughts on leadership to 13 basic rules, one being “Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.” How does this apply to international education?

**POWELL:** I think it applies to international education as I think it applies to every feature of public life. I’ve always tried to see the good things that are out there. And in international education, yes, you run the risk of having someone come into the country who you’d rather not see into the country. But, let’s have optimism about the young people coming here, and optimism about the young people going overseas. If you have that kind of optimism, then you can put the problems in perspective and that perpetual optimism—always looking for a way to get something done—and always believing things will be better, tends to be a force multiplier. Force multiplication—it’s a term often used in the military—is how you leverage advantages and use that leverage against the opponent or situation and I certainly think it applies to education.

**IE:** You are the founding chairman of *America’s Promise: Alliance for Youth* and passionate advocate of children becoming productive citizens. Two of the five promises you emphasize to youth are an effective education and the opportunity to give back to communities through service. How can today’s youth begin to learn about other cultures during their education to becoming productive members of today’s global community?

**POWELL:** I think well-rounded students or graduates of high school or college should have mastery of the English language, understanding of U.S. history but, to really participate in this global environment, it’s important to also to do a lot more with respect to geography, foreign affairs, and learning another language. And I think it is also important for young people—and this deals with the fifth promise of *America’s Promise*—it’s so important for young people to give back to their society. With *America’s Promise*, we encourage this giving back value to begin as early as possible in a school curriculum and in the school years. So we believe strongly in community service programs and in junior high and high school and in college. I’m also the founder of the Colin Powell Policy Center at the City College of New York, my alma mater. We have Powell Fellows and we encourage all of our Powell Fellows to participate in learning programs that

involve other cultures. We had a meeting of the Powell Fellows Advisory Council yesterday in New York and I was so impressed to see some of the subjects that our Powell Fellows are working on: greater understanding of the Jewish experience, the diaspora and a greater understanding of the Holocaust. Some of the Powell fellows will be studying election procedures in Sierra Leone. And by encouraging the students at CCNY and I see it in other schools as well, participating in service-learning programs, work-study programs, and summer programs that send them overseas, we can give them, as part of their education, a greater awareness of what’s happening overseas and also hopefully, push them in a direction that the issues they study also contribute to the understanding of the need for helping others not only in our own country but also in countries around the world.

**IE:** How can colleges and universities improve their relationships with federal government agencies to advocate and advance international education?

**POWELL:** I found very useful for college presidents to write me when I was secretary of state and let me know what problems they were having in processing students and visa slowdowns and what I could do to help them attract students to come to the United States and what improvements they wanted me to make with respect to the clearance process. My advice to college and university administrators is, if you run into problems, if you see federal or departmental policies that you think are not correct that you have suggestions for improving them, don’t sit around campus complaining about it. Send a letter to the secretary of state, secretary of education, secretary of homeland security, write your congressman and let the government know about it.

**IE:** In the best of all possible worlds, what do you hope students and faculty engaged in international education will accomplish in upcoming decades?

**POWELL:** I hope international education will create better understanding between countries, between societies, between peoples, and better understanding of the shared problems we have. Increasingly, problems are shared. How to make our economies more efficient, how to deal with energy needs, how to deal with the environmental problems we have, how to deal with educating our young population of students coming up. These are no longer just Western problems, or Eastern problems, or American problems. They are universal problems. I think international education programs help us deal with these problems in a uniform way. And so we all understand that we are dealing with the same challenges and opportunities, but mostly opportunities, created by a flattening, globalized world. **IE**

**ELAINA LOVELAND** is managing editor of *IE*.