

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with john powell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Powell, John A. (John Anthony)
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with john powell,
Dates:	August 9, 2002 and December 12, 2015
Bulk Dates:	2002 and 2015
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:56:06).
Abstract:	Academic administrator, nonprofit legal director, and law professor john powell (1947 -) was a specialist on poverty and race, and was the National Legal Director for the ACLU. He held the Gregory H. Williams Chair in Civil Rights & Civil Liberties at the Moritz College of Law. Powell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 9, 2002 and December 12, 2015, in Berkeley, California and Minneapolis, Minnesota. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_158
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Professor john a. powell, who does not capitalize his name, was born on May 27, 1947 in Detroit, Michigan. He is recognized as an expert in the areas of civil rights, civil liberties and issues relating to race, poverty and the law and has written extensively on the effects of race and poverty on U.S. society.

Professor powell earned a B.A. in psychology from Stanford University in 1969 and a J.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1973, after which he became an attorney with the Seattle Public Defender's Office. In 1977, powell received an International Human Rights Fellowship from the University of Minnesota to work in Africa, where he served as a consultant to the government of Mozambique. Between 1987 and 1993, he worked as a national legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Professor powell taught at Columbia University School of Law, Harvard Law School, University of Miami School of Law, American University, The University of San Francisco School of Law, The Minnesota Law School before becoming the director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University. He also holds the Gregory H. Williams Chair in Civil Rights & Civil Liberties at the Moritz College of Law. He was the founder and Executive Director of the Institute on Race and Poverty (IRP), located at the University of Minnesota Law School and was appointed the Earl R. Larson Chair of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Law at Minnesota.

Professor powell is also a member of the National Legal Aid and Defender, the National Housing Law Center Association, the National Bar Association and the American Bar Association's Commission on Homelessness and Poverty. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council (PRRAC) and the Minnesota Supreme Court's Implementation Committee on Multicultural Diversity and Racial Fairness.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John Powell was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 9, 2002 and December 12, 2015, in Berkeley, California and Minneapolis, Minnesota, and was recorded on 6 Betacam SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Academic administrator, nonprofit legal director, and law professor John Powell (1947 -) was a specialist on poverty and race, and was the National Legal Director for the ACLU. He held the Gregory H. Williams Chair in Civil Rights & Civil Liberties at the Moritz College of Law.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Powell, John A. (John Anthony)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Powell, John A. (John Anthony)--Interviews

African American law teachers--Interviews

African American lawyers--Interviews

African American college administrators--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

University of Minnesota. Institute on Race and Poverty

American Civil Liberties Union

University of Minnesota. Law School.

Occupations:

Academic Administrator

Nonprofit Legal Director

Law Professor

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers|LawMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with john powell, August 9, 2002 and December 12, 2015. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with john powell, Section A2002_158_001_001, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

john powell was born on May 27th, 1947 in Detroit, Michigan, to Florcie Rimpson Powell, who was born in 1923 in Missouri, and Marshall Powell, Jr., who was born in 1921. Both sides of his family were sharecroppers living in Mississippi and Missouri. powell's paternal great-grandmother lived to age one hundred and bore her children while in Slavery, and his paternal great grandfather was half Native America. His paternal grandfather lived next door to powell's family in Detroit, Michigan, along with numerous relatives in the neighborhood. powell lived in the segregated City of Detroit during the 1950s, in the overcrowded Insker neighborhood, which was developed for the black workforce of the automotive industry. He describes the rigid segregation between the Insker and Dearborn neighborhoods of Detroit, Michigan during the 1950s and 1960s. powell's father worked for General Motors. As a child, powell would often visit his family in Wyatt, Missouri, where he witnessed violence and discrimination.

African American law teachers--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

African American college administrators--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with john powell, Section A2002_158_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

john powell grew up in Detroit, Michigan during the 1950s. He and his family first lived in the Riopelle neighborhood until powell was nine, and then moved to what they hoped would be the integrated neighborhood of Inkster, but it was segregated, as well. powell attended Foch Middle School in Detroit, which was integrated for a short while in the early 1950s, and then it segregated once again. During his youth, powell was intellectually curious, and he questioned the religious principles he was taught at his family's church. He then attended Southeastern High School in Detroit from 1961 to 1965, which was fifty percent black. The black students were discriminated against; they were not able to take college preparatory courses or play on the sports teams, until protests by students and the black community changed this. powell was a strong student and politically involved, but he was unable to receive college recommendation letters from his teachers. Nevertheless, he was accepted to Harvard University and Stanford University, where he decided to attend.

Video Oral History Interview with john powell, Section A2002_158_002_003, TRT: 3:28:49 ?

john powell was the valedictorian of his class at Southeastern High School in Detroit, Michigan, where his teachers tried to dissuade him from applying to Stanford University. Upon graduating in 1965, he worked at the Ford River Rouge Complex, a steel foundry in Dearborn, Michigan. powell then became one of the twenty African American students at Stanford, where he had a closely knit friend group. He also became acquainted with his white classmates like

politician Mitt Romney. He helped start the Black Student Union; and he studied under St. Clair Drake, who went on to found Stanford's African American studies program. While powell initially considered majoring in the hard sciences, he later earned his degree in psychology and philosophy. During this period, powell remained agnostic in his view of the civil rights and black power movements. In 1969, he began his studies at Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut, where he felt disconnected from the African American students and faculty.

Video Oral History Interview with john powell, Section A2002_158_002_004, TRT: 4:29:10 ?

john powell was a student at Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut at the time of Black Panther Bobby Seale's trials. After powell and other protesters were threatened by the Yale administration, powell transferred to the progressive University of California Berkeley School of Law. Following his graduation in 1973, he began working for the public defender's office in Seattle, Washington. In 1977, he received a fellowship to study human rights efforts in Tanzania. There, he met activists like Julius Nyerere and Bill Sutherland, under whom powell conducted research in Mozambique and Zambia. Next, powell taught at the Theosophical Society Adyar in Chennai, India. Upon his return to the United States, he was hired at Evergreen Legal Services in Seattle, where he provided assistance to African American business owners. In 1981, he became the director of the Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc. in Miami, Florida, where he supported the educational and economic development of minority communities.

Video Oral History Interview with john powell, Section A2002_158_002_005, TRT: 5:29:06 ?

john powell joined the faculty at the University of San Francisco School of Law in San Francisco, California in 1983. There, he worked with professors like Kimberle Crenshaw, Charles R. Lawrence, III and Lani Guinier in the application of critical race theory to the law. At this point in the interview, powell talks about the concept of dialogic learning that was developed by German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. In 1987, powell became the national legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in New York City. Through his work there, he co-wrote a handbook, 'The Rights of Racial Minorities'; and he stimulated the organization's attention to issues of race and civil rights. After six years at the ACLU, powell founded the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which investigated the challenges faced by American metropolitan communities.

Video Oral History Interview with john powell, Section A2002_158_002_006, TRT: 6:30:06 ?

john powell established the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1993. At this point in the interview, he talks about the role of race in policymaking, including at institutions of higher education. His textbook, 'In Pursuit of a Dream Deferred: Linking Housing and Education Policy,' was published in 2001. The following year, powell joined the leadership of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Around this time, he wrote his book, 'Racing to Justice: Transforming Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society,' which argued against the existence of a post-racial society. In 2012, powell became the director of the HAAS Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society in Berkeley, California. powell never married, although he has a son, a daughter and two stepchildren. He concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life and legacy.