

Famous People Who Have Known Me: Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

☒ Anybody want to hear about my encounter with Adam Clayton Powell Jr.?

It must have been around 1963. I was a newspaperman in Philadelphia, and Powell, an ultra-flamboyant congressman and minister at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, was in town for a speaking engagement. Beforehand, he was made available for a press conference, where he promised to answer "any questions you want to ask. I never dodge questions." He would come to regret that promise.

Powell was of mixed race, his skin color coffee with cream, tall and too handsome for his own good. At one point he was married to the great singer Hazel Scott, the second of his three wives. At the time I saw him he was in his fifties, and only a decade away from death. I can still recall his baritone voice, slightly nasal and, for want of a better word, insinuating.

By this time he had been in Congress for about 17 years, and he was loaded down with controversy. He had been accused of various financial flim-flams, seemed to be living higher than was plausible, and was in legal trouble. He had made a public remark about a Harlem woman, whom he accused of being a bag woman for the numbers racket, as I recall, and she had sued him and won big money. Powell refused to pay, and avoided subpoenas by staying out of New York and down in the Bahamas, every day except Sunday, when it was illegal to serve subpoenas. Being in New York on Sundays, he was able to preach to his congregation as often as he chose.

His constituents didn't seem bothered by the controversies. They elected him again and again. One Harlemite, asked to

comment on Powell's luxurious lifestyle, wasn't the least bit fazed. "That cat sure knows how to live!" he exulted.

So there he was, standing before us at a podium. And the questions came flying. I don't have my notes anymore, and can't recall any single question or answer, but he made a distinct impression. He was a champion of civil rights, of course, and an absolutely impeccable liberal, never deviating from the liberal litany. Perhaps the most simon-pure liberal in all of politics. That was cool with me, because I felt the same way in those days. That was before liberal morphed into collectivist.

After he had been talking exuberantly with us for more than an hour, he started to get fidgety. He had promised to answer any and all questions, but most of his questioners had fallen silent. One, however, I believe a reporter from a local radio station, just wouldn't stop. The guy must have been preparing to write a three-volume biography of the Reverend.

Powell's answers became shorter and shorter, his tone less and less convivial. At last, as I recall, a Powell aide broke in and said that it was time for the Reverend to move along. That suited most of us press guys, who would long ago have walked out but didn't want to appear rude.

Going into the press conference I had viewed Powell with skepticism, because of his shady reputation, but having the chance to see him in the flesh, interacting with other human beings and handling himself more than adroitly, I decided that I liked him a lot. He would have been a great guy to shoot the breeze with in a cocktail lounge, and it would have been great fun to chase skirts with him at a New York night spot, even though I would undoubtedly have to settle for second pick. That was not to be.