

Adam Clayton Powell

“Keeps the Faith,” but Loses Seat

Frank Joyce

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I have never talked with anyone knowledgeable about Harlem affairs who does not believe that Esther James, the woman who sued Adam Clayton Powell for libel, was a bag woman as the Congressman had called her.

The problem is that in order to prove it, since the defense against libel is the truth, Adam Clayton Powell would have had to produce witnesses willing to testify about corruption in the New York Police Department. Where is the policeman who is willing to admit that he took the payments from Esther James? Or that the N.Y. police department runs the numbers racket in Harlem? So when Esther James admitted on the witness stand, as she did that she was a police informer, that in itself was a tacit admission that she was a bag woman.

There were two gamblers who did testify that they had made payments to Mrs. James. Their testimony was discounted however by the jury, according to a story in the New York Times, because Adam Clayton Powell did not attend the trial.

The connection is at best obscure. Mrs. James, we are informed by the same paper, is now living in Montego Bay Jamaica and cannot be reached by anyone except her attorney.

The point of course is that Adam Clayton Powell did not libel Mrs. Esther James. He was either framed or simply found himself in a very difficult position given the nature of his defense against the charge which apparently he did not take seriously in the first place. Undoubtedly this is the position of Adam Clayton Powell III who has asked the justice department to look into the original verdict, in short to look into the New York City Police Department.

The libel case from which all of former Representative Powell's difficulties stem has of course been obscured by the hoorah about airplane tickets, wives, secretaries and the like. It is a classic example of American racism at work. Racism, particularly as it is practiced in the North is not a simple phenomenon. It is a complex practice worked out over years to avoid the difficulties encountered by the blatancies of the Southern System.

One of the features of the Northern System which one learns to recognize is that all racist acts are prefaced with the denial that they have anything to do with race. The Watts riot had no racial implications. The statement that "I don't care if he is black, blue, green or polka dot ..." inevitably means that he is black and is about to be treated accordingly.

Such statements are the invocation and benediction to the implementation of the double standard. It is this writer's view that if Sen. Thomas Dodd (D.-Conn.) had been white the Senate Ethics committee would never have recommended that he be stripped of his committee chairmanship and denied his seat in the Senate for having been found to pocket campaign contributions, accept money from foreign lobbyists, padding his expense account, charging plane tickets for his own personal use and the like. (Of course the preceding is entirely false, white Sen. Dodd remains a Senator in good standing.)

The fact is that the Congress was acting in its capacity as representatives of the American People. There is no question but that their "get Powell" mail was running very high. That it ran enormously higher against Mr. Powell than against Senator Dodd is exclusively a function of race as is the disparity in the press treatment of the two cases.

It is also true and not surprising that the move against Powell was instigated by liberals. Some of them were paying off their debt to the labor movement, long annoyed at Powell for his outspoken criticism of racism in the labor movement and his blocking of labor legislation for that reason. Others were annoyed because Powell had exposed the fraud of the poverty program and had publicly taken on R. Sargeant Shriver.

Still others were being good white supremacist Americans, reading their mail and revolting at the idea of a black man having power. Which is very simply what the objection to black power comes down to—whites cannot tolerate the notion of black people having power. By the second round the liberals had lost control completely and the fight was taken over by the democrats and the Republicans. And then it was all over.

Adam Clayton Powell committed the cardinal sin. He made a fatal error. He forgot that he was black.

He believed that he was invulnerable, that whitey really wouldn't do it to him. Upset the whole seniority system of the United States Congress just to get an uppity nigger?

Adam was a symbol to Harlem. He made it for every underpaid, exploited, oppressed man and woman in Harlem and every other ghetto in the nation. And he made it on his own terms. Only like Garvey and Malcolm X and countless others before him he didn't really. The terms weren't his. They were and still are whitey's terms any way you want to look at it.

The greatest irony has to do with what made Adam popular in the first place. He was, for a time, a black man beating whitey at his own game. A white woman who called WTAK summed it up when she stated indignantly, "There must be something wrong with Adam Clayton Powell, he acts like he's white."



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