

Adam Powell and Keep the Faith Baby!

Written by Arthur Lewin Ph.D

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Keep the faith, baby! is the title of the 2002 film (directed by Doug McHenry) about the life and times of the first Black New York Congressperson, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., starring Harry Lennix and [Vanessa Williams](#). “Keep the faith, baby!” was the favorite saying of this charismatic, revolutionary leader of Harlem, and much of Black America, in the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s. Surely Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s motto must have kept his son, Adam Clayton Powell IV, going as he doggedly strove for ten long years to get his father’s story told. The film is a masterpiece. However, I remember thinking when I first sat down to watch it, “Here we go again, another Hollywood flick purporting to tell our story, but with the obligatory subtle little twists and digs to distort and demean us.” It was no such thing. It is as straight and pure a history of the man and his times as you could want to see.

There he is, standing tall and cool, and I do mean cool, fighting for the people against any and all, on the streets of New York, in the halls of Congress, in the demonstrations of the civil rights era and above all in his pulpit at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. What [Denzel Washington](#) did for Malcolm X, Harry Lennix does for Adam Clayton Powell, and then some. Watch him majestically, sinuously face down slumlords, union bosses, mayors, senators and any and everyone on the wrong side of history.

When the New York City power brokers set up another Black leader to run for Congress, one whom they thought they could control, Powell steps up to the microphone, and instead of introducing the man as he was asked to, boldly, eloquently declares his own candidacy. And the crowd goes wild! The speech that Lennix delivers, in the tone and the cadence and the fire of Powell himself, is an absolute tour de force. That scene alone, and there are many like it, makes the film.

Like so many of our heroes, we have all but forgotten him. No one can doubt the accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, but few realize that Powell actually

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was right up there with them. He opened up thousands upon thousands of jobs for Blacks in the public and private sectors in New York City. On the national scene, for many years he was Chairman of the Housing, Education and Welfare (HEW) Committee in the House of Representatives, and in that capacity shepherded through the War on Poverty and Great Society legislation that forever changed the prospects of Black America and the nation.

He attained so much seniority in Congress that he was fourth in line to succeed the president. It was at that point that charges were manufactured against him driving him from Congress. However, just as Muhammad Ali was unfairly stripped of his title, only to fight his way back to the top, Adam Clayton Powell regained his seat in Congress despite fierce opposition from the establishment.

The film portrays how, on television one night, he named a woman known in the community as picking up payoff money for corrupt police officers and described her illegal activities. She was subsequently contacted by Powell's enemies and encouraged and financed to bring a defamation suit. Powell's foes in Congress used that and charges that he was spending money on personal trips (something all in Congress were doing) to bar him from his seat.

His constituents voted him in again, nonetheless. The Supreme Court eventually ruled that the actions taken against him were illegal. But this was nearly two years later, and his enemies backed another Black man to run against him for the next two year term. Powell at this point stepped aside and retired. It is interesting to note that everyone of the leaders in Congress who led the move to oust him ended up in scandals of their own and were driven from Congress in disgrace.

When he first came to Washington, Blacks were not allowed to eat in the Congressional Dining Hall. Powell promptly rounded up a dozen Black men and invited them to dine with him thereby ending that racist barrier once and for all. The man was a revolutionary in everything he did, including his personal life. Though an ordained minister, he loved the night life and divorced his wife to marry singer Hazel Scott, brilliantly played by Vanessa Williams. The screen literally ignites when they are on camera together.

By the way, in case you are wondering how Adam Clayton Powell, Jr's son was Adam Clayton Powell IV, that is because he had two sons. The first he named Adam Clayton Powell the third, and the second he christened Adam Clayton Powell the fourth. Yes, that was Adam. He did his own thing, his own way, from beginning to end. And in so doing he paved the way for us all to

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follow in his wake. *Keep the Faith, Baby!* Watch it, and you will be amazed!



The DVD is available on www.amazon.com or .ca

About the author: Dr. Arthur Lewin was born in Harlem and his parents hail from Jamaica and Cuba. He is an avid reader since his childhood.

The former mayor William P. Neary appointed Dr. Lewin to serve as a Trustee for the East Brunswick Public Library Board. Dr. Lewin lives in New York with his family. He holds a doctorate in Sociology from The Graduate School of the City University of New York. His research has included topics in Jamaican political history, charismatic leadership in African America, Africa and the Caribbean and the class structure in Black America. He is currently chronicling the origins and development of Black Studies departments on campuses across the country. He is the author of the popular book,

Africa Is Not A Country: It's A Continent

. Dr. Lewin is also a contributor of

www.thyblackman.com

. You can visit him at his official website:

<http://www.readlikeyourlifedependsonit.com>

and/or contact him at

ramsees7@yahoo.com

. You can also read him

at

www.AfricaUnlimited.com

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