

POLITICS & POLICY

Powell Backer Hopes Tactics That Swayed Ike Will Coax Reluctant General to Take the Plunge

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NEW YORK — Forty-four years ago, John Reagan "Tex" McCrary persuaded Gen. Dwight Eisenhower to stop dithering and run for president. Now he's hot after Gen. Colin Powell to do the same.

Ike was easier.

Back in 1951, Mr. McCrary was a television and radio personality, half of the "Tex and Jinx" talk show. Financier Bernard Baruch introduced him to Gen. Eisenhower in Paris; as they entered the office, the general was putting golf balls into a highball glass turned on its side.

Eight months later, in February 1952, Mr. McCrary staged a midnight rally at Madison Square Garden, with 30,000 fans chanting in unison, "We want Ike!" In those presatellite days, he had Jacqueline Cochran, the famous aviatrix, rush a film of the event overseas. "To the president," she toasted, after the Gen. Eisenhower watched the pandemonium on screen. He broke down in tears, and a few weeks later announced he would enter the New Hampshire primary.

"Tex has a sense of the dramatic that leaves your jaw open," says Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose, who has now joined Mr. McCrary in a draft-Powell movement. "He had an audience of one, but he played it perfectly."

Mr. McCrary has mapped out a reprise for Gen. Powell, complete with a Thanksgiving Day rally patterned after the Madison Square Garden extravaganza. Whether the strategy will work in a media-jaded age is far from certain. But the efforts underscore the fundamental difference between Mr. Powell and the rest of the presidential contenders, announced or otherwise. The other guys are courting voters; voters are courting Colin Powell, who may well snub them in the end.

"The seeker is never so popular as the sought," Gen. Eisenhower noted four decades ago. "People want what they think they can't get."

Anyway, playing hard-to-get should



Colin Powell

boost sales of Mr. Powell's autobiography published this week. And the general plans to "keep his options open" through his book-promotion tour, he said in an interview with Time magazine. "If I decided to run for office as a Republican, then I've got to get started in November because the registrations start to close down in December," he said. "As an independent, you don't have to make a choice quite that early." In either event, Mr. Powell said, "I would think that after the book tour, I've got to make some choices."

Slowly sipping a beer last week in New York's financial district, Mr. McCrary is dejected. The evening before, Gen. Powell had spoken at a book party and hadn't even hinted at a presidential run. "I didn't see any headline. I didn't see any exclamation," Mr. McCrary frets. He wonders whether Mr. Powell burns with the fire to be president.

But the doubts slowly fade; they always do. At 84 years old, Mr. McCrary is trim, has a magnetic-tape memory and, despite a decades-long bout with cancer, still displays a promoter's dogged optimism. He has spent much of his life as a publicist; his biggest coup was producing a Moscow exhibit of an American kitchen, which became the scene of famous Nixon-Khrushchev "kitchen debate" on the merits of capitalism. He is also responsible for persuading a client to desegregate the second Levittown, says his one-time lieutenant, New York Times columnist William Safire.

Now he shows off what he plans to mail to the Powell family: a money clip with "Ike" in big letters for the general, an Eisenhower commemorative coin for the grandson and some books for the general's wife, Alma. Mr. McCrary figures he must court the entire Powell family because the general will consult them all before deciding whether to run. Last time around, he only had to worry about Mamie.

A longtime veterans activist, Mr. McCrary first met Gen. Powell while recruiting him to speak at an Eisenhower centennial in 1990. Later he persuaded Mr. Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to honor military doctors annually with medals. He says he saw in Mr. Powell the second coming of Eisenhower — a thoroughly trusted individual who can lead the U.S. through its troubles. At a time of racial turmoil and bitter ideological division, Mr. Powell is "a healer," he says.

Mr. McCrary is part courtier, part counsel, and part pain in the neck to the younger general. Rehearse your lines so they seem extemporaneous, he advises Mr. Powell in endless letters. Go for the headlines. Don't laugh at your own jokes. Don't look down at your notes. "I'll try to stop looking like a 'chicken swallowing water,'" writes back Mr. Powell.

Mr. McCrary also plots strategy and tactics with other Powell backers. He introduces the chief Powell organizer, investment banker Charles Kelly, to former Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who shortly afterwards endorses Mr. Powell. When Mr. McCrary hears that Mrs. Powell doubts her husband can win the Republican nomination because of opposition from the right, he has Mr. Kelly write a strategy memo for her focusing on states where independents and Democrats can vote in Republican primaries.

Mr. Ambrose turns to Mr. McCrary for advice in writing a rave review of the Powell autobiography. Mr. Ambrose plans to start with a reference to Grant's memoirs. No good, Mr. McCrary objects; Grant was a lousy president. "Start with de Toqueville," the 19th century French social critic who wrote about the initiative of the American people, Mr. McCrary advises. He does. After the Boston Globe decides against using the review because of Mr. Ambrose's role in the draft-Powell movement, Mr. McCrary pitches it to U.S. News and World Report.

Mr. Powell seems both pleased and exasperated by Mr. McCrary's efforts on his behalf. The general fancies himself a student of Eisenhower, and outfitted a

Pentagon corridor with Eisenhower pictures, busts and memorabilia. "Gen. Powell is flattered by [Tex's] support and consideration," says his spokesman, Bill Smullen.

Sometimes, though, Mr. McCrary pushes too hard. He started planning a gala "Powell Homecoming Celebration" for the Bronx native in Madison Square Garden or Radio City Music Hall after Mr. Powell stepped down as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1993. Mr. Powell killed that idea. "First, I am not coming home to New York," he wrote Mr. McCrary, "so it seems a bit awkward to have such a party for someone who is not coming home."

Undaunted, this time Mr. McCrary isn't asking Mr. Powell's permission to set up a Thanksgiving Rally for Powell to try to persuade him to run. After all, he never asked Eisenhower's permission to stage the Madison Square Garden event. The Thanksgiving rally is designed to twang deeply on the general's emotional bowstring. The setting: a federal building in downtown Manhattan where George Washington took his first oath of office. The participants: first-time voters — an echo of Mr. Powell's immigrant parents — and student leaders from Mr. Powell's old Bronx high school and other city schools. A children's songwriter has already written the anthem, called "Just Do It."

"Every television set in the nation will be watching Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade," enthuses Mr. McCrary. "Bang. This goes on at 12 p.m."

Longtime friends of Mr. Powell, a relentlessly rational man, doubt he'll be swayed by emotion. But presidential scholar Michael Beschloss isn't quite so sure. "When you look at the alchemy of what goes on inside a human being's mind," he says, "this could tip the balance in the direction toward running in the same way the rally in Madison Square Garden did."