

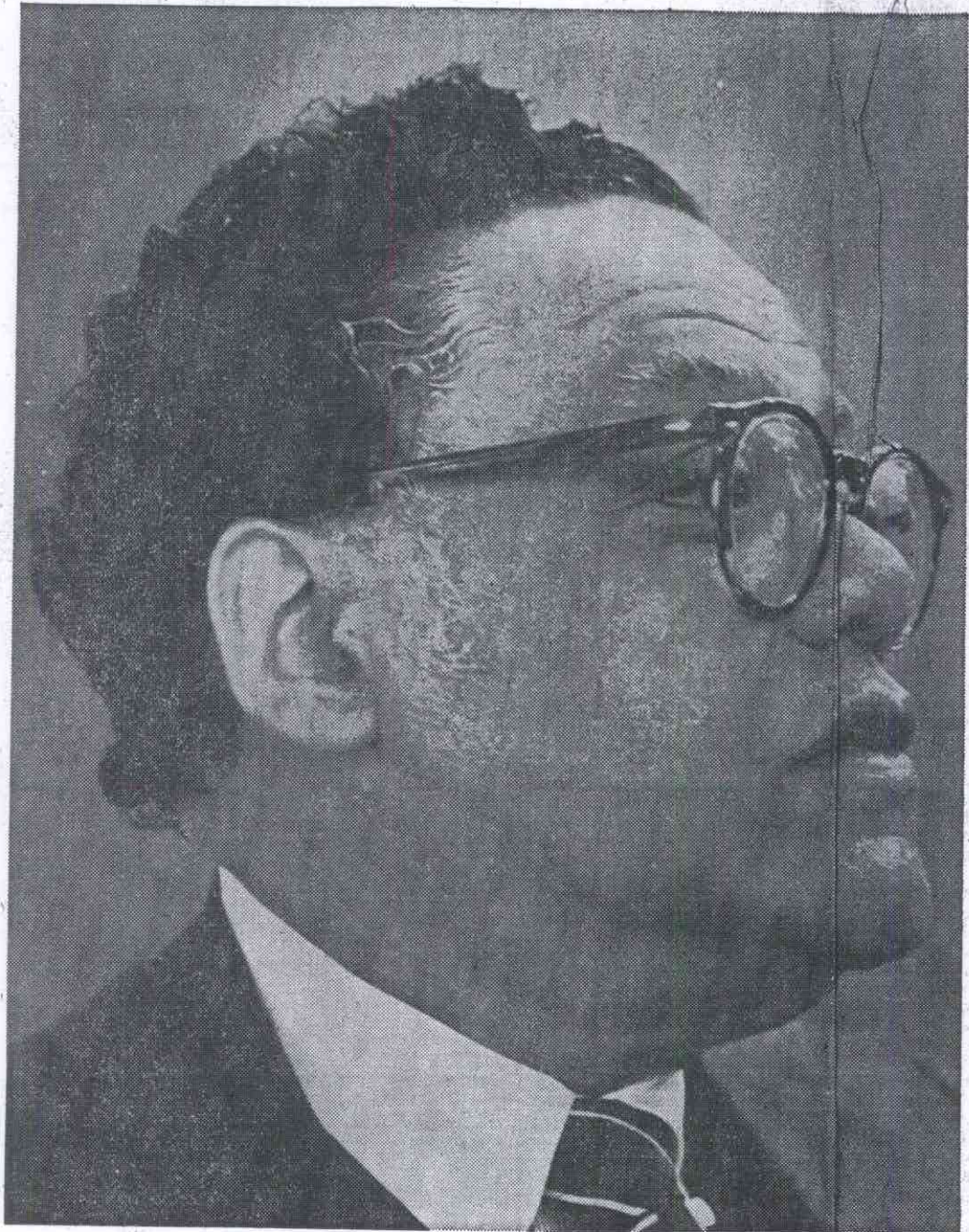
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# STYLE

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*William Thaddeus Coleman Jr.: a life "consumed with shooting for the best, hitting the out-of-the-park homers with bases loaded and the bleachers cheering..."*

By James A. Parcell  
—The Washington Post





## An Unflinching Career Of Being First and No. 1

By Jacqueline Trescott

For the swearing-in ceremony of William Thaddeus Coleman Jr. as the fourth Secretary of Transportation, his children opened the family Bible to the verse they thought best described their father. They hit the nail on the head.

In Isaiah, Chapter One, is the well-known passage, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord ... if you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword."

His kids say it was simply an apt reminder for a post-Watergate public official to stay clean and obey the rules. But for Bill Coleman, whose life has been consumed with shooting for the best, hitting the out-of-the-park homers with the bases loaded and the bleachers cheering, it was more than appropriate.

Make your contribution, utilize your talents in a variety of fields, build a national reputation, do it all effectively, generously and without a whimper. That's Bill Coleman.

"I don't care if you want to be a bum, as long as you're a first-class bum," Coleman once told one of his three children. For two generations Colemans have been conditioned with words like "excell" and "first-class." And the verbal advice was minimized because examples of excellence were all around. The senior Colemans, loving and assertive parents, knew people like pioneer black sociologist and thinker William E. B. DuBois, attorney Charles Huston and Elihu Root, the Secretary of State who was also active in the Boys Club movement like Coleman Sr. In his 20s Coleman entered the Harvard circle with classmates Elliot Richardson and William Bundy and then with Richardson was a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. You had to keep up.

So early on Coleman, 55, developed his own set of rules, playing the game of achievement brilliantly and shrewdly. Show that your interests are grounded in a love for your own people but show, too, that those are not your exclusive concerns. Adapt almost flawless legal procedures for everything and stay away from full-time public jobs until the time is right. Being a top dog in the private sector brings power, money and a little mystique. "In the private sector you learn who can cut the mustard," says Coleman. Too many public jobs make you a target.

Coleman was barely 30 and an advocate of Frankfurter's example of total personal immersion in every detail when he joined the legal team working on the Brown vs. the Board of Education case. He volunteered to coordinate the research in the 37 states, even getting a segregationist lawyer to help, and, as the attorneys sat around, Coleman debated strategies harder than anyone else. "Not because of a difference in philosophy but to deduce the best reasons from everyone," says one of the lawyers who contributed to the landmark school desegregation case.

When his children angered him Coleman held court around their Philadelphia dining room, with a portrait of Frankfurter smiling down on the proceedings. They had a choice of punishment, corporal or time, and the biggest challenge was "not to cry because Daddy had just gone through this very cool and efficient procedure." To this day the family has vigorous debates with Coleman, who "often takes the outrageous view, only to see if our thinking process is sharp."

So when Coleman assembled both sides of

See COLEMAN, H3, Col.1



COLEMAN, From H1

the SST-Concorde controversy for a formal, open debate in January, a move Henry Kissinger called "an act of genius," Coleman was merely operating normally. He was visible, asked the questions, listened carefully, wrote the brief personally, an exercise that helped him reach his decision that the supersonic plane be given a 16-month trial period now scheduled to begin Monday at Dulles Airport, barring last-minute Supreme Court action.

"I don't look at any of my decisions as tough. Some of them are more interesting. Some more challenging when you have to decide what's proper and those decisions often don't command public attention. But people are paying me to make decisions," says Coleman. His speech carries a judicial gravity, always with a perfectly paced nasal twang that's at once Philadelphia and Harvard.

Below his champagne-carpeted office on the 10th floor of Transportation stretches a Romare Bearden collage of the job's symbols: cars soaring along the freeway, boats anchored peacefully in the Washington Channel, Metro construction and potholes and the fleeting, cotton jet streams over National Airport. "Yes, but the I-66 veto, the Concorde and the highway program ..." he continues, listing and savoring the controversial decisions. The controlled smile does not hide the glint of exhilaration in his eyes.

One of the reasons Coleman says he took this job, after bragging of turning down offers like Assistant Secretary of State in the '50s, an appellate judgeship from Lyndon Johnson, and more recently the Watergate Special Prosecutor post, is "because this country has been so good to me."

Indeed it has. He has been where few blacks and not that many whites have been. Head of the Harvard Law School Class of '43. At 26 the first black law clerk at the Supreme Court. The first black in major New York and Philadelphia law firms. An attorney who made \$250,000 a year and built a nice portfolio of IBM, Xerox, Pan-Am, Walt Disney Productions and Philadelphia Electric Co. stocks. The second black in the Cabinet.

His friends will tell you that he's never been a token, a black selected solely for his color, and that's partly because you don't think of today's Bill Coleman as really black or white. And given the accepted diversity of black America today it probably doesn't matter that a Cabinet member is a black Republican conservative who has to worry about noise pollution.

In his swearing-in President Ford didn't even mention Coleman's race and Coleman liked that. He's a man who might say, "I'm the Secretary for all the people." When it's mentioned that he was the first black board member of Pan American Airways, he snaps: "I really don't think this 'first black' this and that is relevant. I'm trying to make a reputation in this town that's not based on color."

Swirling around him now are accusations that he hasn't been bold enough about improving minority employment at DOT though the percentages have improved in his 14 months. People still point out that after Coleman joined his prestigious Philadelphia law firm in 1952 another black (a man who is partly Jewish) wasn't hired until 1967.

If Coleman has relished the King of the Mountain role he has done an impressive job of balancing his civil rights and corporate work. Besides his work on the Brown case, Coleman won the challenge to the constitutionality of a Florida law prohibiting interracial marriage, won the case that integrated Girard College, a Philadelphia private orphan institution, and, in the 1960s, defended Freedom Riders and sit-in demonstrators.

And the only time his family remembers him being despondent is when Coleman lost the Richmond Schools case in the Supreme Court by a 4-4 decision three years ago.

He doesn't bring these accomplishments up in conversations, his friends hurriedly point out, but they say that when they are mentioned Coleman is pleased.

Now, despite Coleman's conservative look, his roly form pressed into gray and blue three-piece suits from his London tailor and the Tiffany touch of a gold watch chain, Bill Coleman is not a stick in the mud.

The word in his office is informal. Everyone has been told to call him Bill Coleman, not Mr. Secretary. A few old friends call him "Bumps," but he will not explain why. He answers his phone on Saturdays, leaves the door opened and his pictures of Ford, Lyndon Johnson, Nelson Rockefeller and the Coleman children are candid.

It's obvious that he's always been concerned about his image. Right after World War II Coleman began to put on weight and he didn't mind because he thought it made him look older and therefore more acceptable to his clients.

Very few attorneys who dream of sitting on the Supreme Court, like Bill Coleman, are mavericks. He has always lived within 15 blocks of where he was born in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. "Once you join a political party I believe you should stay with it," is his explanation for not changing his Republican registration since 1944. When his wife and two children converted to the Society of Friends in the early '60s, Coleman remained an Episcopalian, though he attends the Quaker meetings frequently. He always takes his family to Woodstock, Vt., for summers, an idyllic community reminiscent of his father's summer camp where Coleman was a counselor.

In his life there has been little dramatic change and few surprises. He once told a young lawyer in his firm, "The mark of a good attorney is often what he does not say. Consider very





Associated Press

*Coleman, center, being congratulated by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall following White House swearing-in.*

carefully our words—they may lead you into other areas you may not anticipate."

But he changed his mind about full-time public service (his bio lists four inches of part-time public service including the counsel for Warren Commission, co-chairman of the White House Civil Rights Conference and the United Nations alternate delegate) when Ford offered him four Cabinet positions.

"A large part was Watergate," Coleman says. "It was a difficult experience for the country and I felt people who had never been fully involved should try." In the true Coleman form of not saying too much, he's saying that he was the kind of person to restore confidence in the government. Yes, he's pompous and "once in a while you have to remind him that he's human," says a good friend, Louis Pollack, dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School and former dean of the Yale Law School.

There are some people who feel that Coleman is not only stuffy but an elitist and an opportunist. Sometimes he does seem behind the times. In a recent interview, for example, he referred to fighter Muhammad Ali as "Cassius Clay" without so much as a blink. He's very impatient with people who aren't as smart as he is but also, because he likes to argue, he doesn't want a cadre of yes men around him. "Coleman has a precise notion of where the power lies, who he has to please. He's one of those politicians who can put the person inside them aside and utilize their own talents at image-making. He is vindictive and people fear him because he's well-connected and well-respected," says a lawyer. Though his children adore him they admit that his total absorption in his job, the seven-day-a-week schedule, often left them short-changed.

Since last year Coleman has learned

to enjoy the Washington scene. Lovida Coleman, the New Orleans history student he met at Radcliffe College and married during World War II, usually attends only the official functions and her husband shields her from interviews. "That's why I never liked politicians because they bring their wives into the public," he says crisply. When they first moved here they lived in the McLean home of Elliot Richardson and now the Colemans rent another house in the same exclusive section.

When he is home, and his worsted vest is finally unbuttoned, Coleman reads historical and biographical novels—Gore Vidal's "Burr," a recent one about Lafayette's wife—and watches sports. He's a Dodgers fan. He used to be a good tennis player. And he loves to eat. He enjoys the Sans Souci as much for its chocolate mousse as its social scene. The day after the Concorde announcement Coleman pattered around his office wondering who to take to lunch there. He knew he would be in the limelight.

And he's popular, partly because his sophistication and unshakeable self-confidence have led to a loose and often self-deprecating humor.

One evening after leaving a dinner at the Mayflower Hotel Coleman told a friend he would walk the four blocks back to the Madison Hotel, where he stayed right after his appointment. The friend said, "But Bill we don't want a Cabinet member being mugged," and Coleman replied, "I don't have anything to worry about, I'm one of them."

Spunky, sophisticated and nervy. Once he made a polite joke while arguing a case before the Supreme Court, something almost unheard of. But then it runs in the family. Laura Coleman, his 83-year-old mother, tugged President Ford's sleeve after the swearing-in and said "Thank you for all the nice things you said about my



son but I have two other children who are just as nice and I'd like you to meet them," thereby throwing off the protocol of the entire ceremony.

The cobblestone streets of historic Germantown were never as much of a playground for young Coleman as the courts. "I really don't know why," Coleman says now but at age 10 he had decided to be a lawyer and asked his father if he could go with him to the courts. The Coleman children were raised in an integrated neighborhood by parents, both college graduates, who provided a comfortable, intellectually-stimulating and religious home. "Bill was always outstanding, so outstanding that Daddy wouldn't sign our report cards some times. We all had to do our best," recalls Coleman's older sister, Emma, a school teacher in Atlantic City. His younger brother, Robert, is an engineer for the railroad car firm, the Budd Company.

Though Coleman was prevented from joining the Germantown High School swim team because the local YMCA didn't allow blacks in the pool, he "had enough confidence in himself to pass over those things," says his sister and he finished at the top of the class. He finished the University of Pennsylvania (where he was on the track team) and Harvard Law, where he was on the Law Review, at the head of the class. World War II interrupted his law studies and Coleman served in the Air Corps, earning his fighter's wings and also winning 17 out of 18 court martial cases he handled.

At Harvard, where he is remembered not only as a brilliant student but also as a "regular" by classmates, Coleman decided, "we could only end the racial segregation by the legal process. I also thought it would only work if you fashioned your arguments with those that didn't have a racial foundation."

Along with the self-imposed principle of mastering all the law came the philosophies of Justice Frankfurter who told his young clerks, Coleman and Richardson, "be as near Michelangelo as you can." Frankfurter read five newspapers a day, chatted daily with people like Dean Acheson and applied himself tirelessly to his Court work. The two clerks read Pushkin, Auden and Shakespeare in the morning, and now, NAACP attorney Jack Greenberg, one of Coleman's closest friends marvels at "the way Bill can pull analogies in poetry, literature, philosophy and political science out of the air. He's genuinely learned but not ostentatious."

Despite the prestige of a Supreme Court clerkship (in 1948-49), Coleman was not protected from the racism of the Washington of that time and when he returned to Philadelphia he was unable to find a job in its closed and bigoted world.

Finally he commuted daily to New York where he worked for three years with Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison. In that Wall Street off-

ice a balance between corporate and public service law was stressed and Coleman continued the practice when he joined Philadelphia's prestigious firm of Dilworth, Paxton, Kalish and Levy. In 1956 Coleman was made a full partner in the firm. For 10 years he was special counsel to the City of Philadelphia for Transit matters, building his expertise in transportation law.

"Bill Coleman is a fellow that goes deep into whatever the situation calls for. Things by him don't come easily," says Ned LeDonne, a transportation union leader in Philadelphia who often sat on the other side of the negotiations table from Coleman. "You gotta show him a reason. He's very cool and I've never seen him do anything that would discredit him."

By his example more than his words Bill Coleman set up a standard of achievement, vigor, independence and concern for his kids. One day, realizing the isolation of their private school education, Coleman put the whole family in the car and drove from their block where they were the only black family across town to the slums of North Philadelphia. "I was appalled and he meant for us to be appalled," recalls Lovida, 27, now a law clerk for a New York judge. "We had always lived the struggle. There were threatening phone calls whenever he was involved in a civil rights case."

Some of his teachings, especially independent thinking, backfired in the '60s. Lovida, who attended Radcliffe College for two years, was the only child who went to Harvard, something he wanted very badly, and the two lawyers, William III and Lovida, both attended Yale Law School. "It would have been an enormous psychological pressure being his son at Harvard. And he did not encourage me in my choice of Williams College," says Billy Coleman, 29, an antitrust lawyer in Philadelphia. Hardy Coleman, 24, his youngest, is a teacher in Philadelphia.

Next Coleman, whose life had been devoted to change through the legal process, was confronted by kids who were activists on campus and doves on the Vietnam War. "When Billy was involved in the take-over of the administration building at Williams, Dad was caught between fearing for our safety, and not recognizing the value of direct action. It took some time for him to come around. But we finally won him on that and the war," says Lovida.

"The old man will never admit you've changed his mind. He takes a position that seems impenetrable and then a week later you will hear him adopting your position. We never knew on the Concorde and at Christmas, Hardy and I had argued violently against it. The only time he admitted we were right was when we argued about the value of black studies. He said the general liberal arts taught you to think, then you could specialize. I said a black studies course would teach the same thinking process. That was the only time we got him."