

BOOKS & THE ARTS.

The Gentlemen From Harlem

PETER DAILEY

ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma. By Charles V. Hamilton. *Atheum*. 595 pp. \$24.95.

VITO MARCANTONIO: Radical Politician, 1902-1954. By Gerald Meyer. *State University of New York*. 303 pp. \$57.50. Paper \$18.95.

One of the last times I saw Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was in 1968, and he was sitting at a table at the Moon Palace across from Columbia University. With his head of straight, jet-black hair and neatly trimmed mustache, he looked more like a movie star than a Congressman or Baptist minister, and he exhibited a celebrity's indifference to the curious pedestrians who stopped to peer over the menus posted in the window. Although Powell was fighting for his political life, he showed no sign of unease as he sat among the red lacquer Buddhas, examining his manicure and smoking a cigarette with a meditative air.

The previous winter the House of Representatives had taken the virtually unprecedented step of voting to exclude him, and for a number of years a warrant for his arrest for contempt of court had kept him from visiting his district. Nonetheless, his long-delayed return to Harlem the month before had sparked pandemonium. Following his surrender to a justice of the New York Supreme Court and release on his own recognizance, he had been welcomed back by supporters at a late-night rally at the Renaissance Ballroom at 138th Street and Seventh Avenue. The performance was vintage Powell; shedding his coat and loosening his tie, at six feet three towering over the throng that pressed around him shouting encouragement and reaching out to touch him or shake his hand, he delivered a short speech vowing to punish those black leaders he felt had betrayed him. During the next hours, the *Amsterdam News* noted, "Harlem's No. 1 Man" made stops at Small's Paradise, Basie's Bar, the Red Rooster and half a dozen other nightspots. He had not slept when,

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at noon the next day, he addressed a rally at 125th Street in pouring rain and then, surrounded by his entourage, marched up Seventh Avenue to the Abyssinian Baptist Church. "He was a rascal, I'm telling you," one longtime acquaintance recalled, "but he had charm—no question he had charisma—and he had that community in the palm of his hand."

Charles V. Hamilton's *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* is the most comprehensive examination to date of the career of the flamboyant Congressman whose historic achievements were largely overshadowed by his controversial downfall. The dominant figure in Harlem politics for more than thirty years, at the peak of his career in the mid-fifties Powell was the leading national spokesman for African-Americans, and was known as "Mr. Civil

What angered the political pros most was Powell's refusal to stay bought.

Rights" for his uncompromising opposition to segregation and racial discrimination. An otherwise critical article in *The New York Times* conceded that Powell had "won a reputation as the nation's most militant Negro leader," one who had "done more to dramatize the civil rights issue than any other man in modern times."

A man with great political gifts, the debonair Powell was a spellbinding public speaker. Restlessly pacing back and forth on the rostrum, he could hold an audience for hours, reiterating his points in a genial patronizing tone. When stirred to anger or amused contempt, his light baritone took on a harsh edge and had no difficulty reaching the back pews. Long before his downfall, people who knew Powell had come to deplore the profligate way he had squandered his talents and to regard him as a tragic figure. Arthur Spingarn, president of the N.A.A.C.P., spoke for many when he said that if only Powell had had character, he would have been a great man.

As early as 1943, journalist Roi Otti noted that "while loudly applauding achievements, Negroes frankly distrust him," and questioned whether he had any goal other than attaining power. Even more than with most politicians, with Powell it was impossible, and pointless to attempt to disentangle public and private motives. In exchanging his endorsement for large cash payments to cover "campaign expenses," Powell exhibited rapacity that offended even hardened political pros. But what angered them most was his refusal to stay bought. He was always ready, Hamilton notes, to reach accommodation, "not only with the highest bidder, but apparently also with the latest bidder." Most of this behavior African-American leaders could tolerate. What they could not accept was Powell's penchant for walking away from a political fight when he got bored, regardless of the stakes, and for turning on his friends without notice, often with a gratuitous viciousness.

One of the many anomalous aspects of Powell's career, and a striking illustration of the absurdity of American racial conventions, was that the man who for two decades was the most highly visible spokesman for black aspirations was a "Negro by courtesy" and had no discernible African ancestry. Although occasionally told interviewers that his grandfather had been a branded slave and that as a child he had traced a scar in the shape of a letter P on his back, Powell was actually a descendant of freeborn tenant farmers, part of Virginia's tiny light-skinned elite. The son of Adam Clayton Powell Sr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, which he had built into one of the nation's largest Protestant congregations, Powell was born, one of his colleagues acknowledged, "to walk the royal road."

Neither studious nor notably introspective, then or later, Powell revealed little of his school career that would presage the transformation that occurred after his graduation from Colgate, when his father engineered his ordination and made him an assistant minister at Abyssinian. From the start, Powell not only displayed remarkable organizing and administrative skills—supervising the Abyssinian's distribution of food, clothing and coal to Harlem families during the Depression—but a hitherto undetected capacity for hard work.

Even more remarkable was his metamorphosis into a spokesman for the black masses. During the Harlem Hospital strike in 1933, he emerged as the leader of the insurgents, and throughout the thirties, the young minister was at the forefront of Harlem's protest movements. He was a familiar sight during the boycott of stores on 125th Street, and during the campaign to force the Fifth Avenue Coach Company to hire black drivers and mechanics. Powell could be seen carrying a sign on the picket line, a pipe clenched between his teeth. At the Scottsboro rallies, and on a dozen other occasions, he was the articulate voice of popular discontent, haranguing audiences from a platform on the back of a truck.

It is hard not to see his identification with Harlem protest movements as part of his rebellion against his father and the N.A.A.C.P. types with whom he was associated. Powell made his name as a spokesman for the black masses, and throughout his career, the threat of taking to the streets was a club that Powell wielded against "big Negroes" with great effectiveness. He seemed to delight in ridiculing the black middle class, of which there could have been no more certifiable member than himself.

The "American dilemma" of Hamilton's title alludes, of course, to sociologist Gunnar Myrdal's influential 1944 examination of the gap between American ideals and the social practices epitomized by de jure segregation in the South and de facto segregation in the North. Hamilton, however, is also referring to a more specific problem, a perennial quandary, apparent ever since African-Americans first began to formulate a political response to their oppression: "How does one balance pragmatic politics based on objective reality with a clear, pure stand on moral grounds?" Under what circumstances is strategic compromise, which appears to acquiesce in continuing segregation or other injustice, warranted? When are the moral claims of those who would militantly adhere to a principled position, regardless of the consequences, paramount? For Powell, there was no escaping the horns of this particular dilemma and no answer for all political seasons. His career illustrated the virtues and limitations of these competing approaches.

For much of his tenure in Congress he was, Hamilton notes, the "quintessential irritant," a role for which he was peculiarly well suited. Hamilton suggests that it was as if he had "consciously decided to make Americans as blatantly uncom-

fortable as possible with the discrepancy between creed and practice. His aim in race relations was not to be polite, but . . . to raise the discomfort level as high as possible." He took particular pleasure in baiting John Rankin, the arch-segregationist from Mississippi; the exchanges between the two received extensive coverage in the Negro press. When Rankin announced after Powell's election that he would refuse to sit next to him in Congress, Powell made a point of heading in Rankin's direction every time he spotted him in the chamber. On one occasion, Rankin was reported to have changed his seat five times.

His legislative strategy was equally confrontational. With Clarence Mitchell of the N.A.A.C.P., he devised what became known as the Powell Amendment, a rider attached to all appropriations measures stipulating that federal funding would be withheld from any racially segregated facility. This controversial tactic insured the defeat of a wide range of progressive legislation, particularly in the area of federal aid to education, public housing and health care. Nonetheless, in the opinion of Roy Wilkins it laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Powell's greatest legacy.

For most observers, Powell's career reached its culmination in the 1960s, when he attained unprecedented institutional power, for an African-American, as chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, and helped secure passage of key Great Society legislation. But Hamilton, a professor of government at Columbia University, contends that other liberal legislators would have been equally effective. He persuasively argues that it was as a militant advocate of racial justice in the 1940s and 1950s—a time when "if he did not speak out, the issue would not have been raised"—that Powell played his unique historical role.

Powell often derided the older generation of African-American leaders as Uncle Toms, and he was particularly scathing in his criticism of the brokering, wire-pulling and manipulation of white patrons they preferred to more militant tactics. Yet Hamilton demonstrates that in spite of Powell's defiant rhetoric, the insider's game became increasingly seductive as his tenure in Washington lengthened. He was on easy and cordial terms with members of the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations and attempted to exploit these contacts. All too frequently, however, in the end it was unclear who had been manipulated. In par-

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ticular, a series of politically motivated prosecutions for income tax evasion and an ongoing investigation of his finances that lasted for almost a decade left him with his appetite for confrontation notably diminished.

The bane of reformers and regulars alike, Powell had risen to power outside conventional political channels, making, the late Democratic boss J. Raymond Jones records, the "occasional insouciant bow" toward his fellow Democrats when expediency dictated. Jones himself had been largely unsuccessful in his attempts to tame "that temperamental leopard in my backyard." And in 1958, when Powell fought off a Tammany effort to unseat him, he had risen, in Jones's opinion, to "rhetorical and charismatic heights that Harlem has never seen before and probably will never see again." Powell used to tell Harlem audiences, "I know you will vote for me until I die, and even after I'm dead I think some of you will write my name in."

Powell's place in the Congressional power structure, however, was considerably less secure. The drive against Powell, which began as an attempt by liberal colleagues to clip his wings because of his chronic absenteeism and the highhanded way he administered his committee, soon took on a life of its own. At least initially, Powell was in his element dealing with the press, displaying great aplomb as he bantered with reporters while seated in the chairman's chair, waving his cigar and blowing smoke rings. His problems were exacerbated by negative publicity resulting from a junket to Europe with two female companions, and by the revelation that he had placed his estranged wife on his staff payroll in a no-show job and was pocketing her salary.

Convinced that his electoral position was unassailable, Powell sought to rally his constituents by raising the cry of racism. Without question, racism was a significant ingredient in Powell's downfall, but it was hardly the determining one, and doesn't explain the lackluster backing he received from civil rights organizations or the steady erosion of the support of liberal colleagues. Powell consistently undermined the efforts of his defenders and seemed, Jones noted, "quite capable of doing things that even a high school politician would avoid." Well into middle age, he was still recognizably the spoiled minister's son, with a fondness for high living that he made little effort to conceal, a damaging departure from the

mores of scores of equally venal and corrupt colleagues in Congress.

As the movement against him gained strength, Powell displayed a curious fatalism. He had enormous contempt for most white people and regarded Congress as a bastion of hypocrisy, unfit to pass judgment on him. In the face of deepening controversy he remained totally unrepentant. At crucial moments in the fight, when a compromise might have been patched together, he was away in Bimini and refused to return. The cover of *Newsweek* showed him at his island retreat in beach clothes and sunglasses, unable to repress a smirk. "Anybody that would leave Bimini would be a fool," he informed one reporter. In fact, his stay on Bimini was not an uninterrupted idyll: Sporting a bad dye job and putting back a quart of vodka a day, Powell suffered the indignity of seeing his longtime mistress leave him for the captain of his fishing boat.

Vito Marcantonio was, if anything, even more controversial than Powell.

After his expulsion from the House, Powell was immediately re-elected to fill the vacancy but was largely absent for the remainder of his term. Because his salary was being docked to pay the fine levied against him, he let it be known that for part-time pay, he would only be a part-time Congressman. Finally, in his last bid for re-election, in 1970, he hardly bothered to campaign. In spite of this he lost to the present incumbent, Charles Rangel, by only 150 votes.

In 1971 at the first Ali-Frazier fight at Madison Square Garden, I was part of the crowd by the banks of escalators when Powell arrived with a group of his cronies, waving away the ticket takers. Pushed along by the crush in the lobby, I found myself in line behind the great man for the interminable ride to the cheapest seats at the top of the arena. Although he could have used a shine and had a faintly seedy aspect, he was still, at 62, taller and handsomer than anyone around him. He was also mortally ill with cancer. At the top, he signaled to the head usher, calling out in his grating voice, "Do you think you could find something

for a thirteen-term Congressman?" The usher, an older black man, undoubtedly jeopardized his job when he hastened to accommodate him. Plainly, Powell's disgrace and fall from power had not affected the ties between him and the ordinary working people who had supported him so overwhelmingly. Nothing he did could have done would have diminished their allegiance. He died in Miami the following spring.

Hamilton's admirable study not only provides insight into this complex and contradictory personality but helps illuminate a neglected period in the civil rights struggle. Although his sympathetic and judicious assessment of Powell is largely persuasive, the burden of judgment ultimately rests with the reader. This book is unlikely to resolve the dispute over Powell's career and character, it because the controversies Powell embodied are still very much with us.

The career of Vito Marcantonio, the radical Congressman who represented East Harlem nearly continuously from 1934 to 1950, was, if anything, even more controversial than Powell's, and more roundly anathematized. But unlike Powell, Marcantonio has been largely forgotten.

An outspoken critic of the New Deal—which he saw as a collection of grossly inadequate half-measures—the flamboyant Marcantonio was one of labor's staunchest allies. During his seven terms in Congress, Marcantonio, Gerald Meyer notwithstanding, fought for the interests of working people against the ruling class he believed was bent on maintaining its hegemony. "Marc," as he was known to his admirers, campaigned for greater public housing, liberalized immigration laws, civil rights legislation and Puerto Rican independence. The only member of Congress from the American Labor Party (A.L.P.), he became so thoroughly identified with the domestic and foreign agenda of the Communist Party that most of his career was spent in a political isolation his natural combativeness only enhanced.

Almost from the beginning, Marcantonio faced formidable opposition. At one time, the coalition arrayed against him included all the major parties; the Archdiocese of New York; a large segment of liberal opinion, ranging from Eleanor Roosevelt to John Dewey; and newspapers from *The New York Times* to *Progresso*. Every two years his opponent

renewed their onslaught, but each time his deeply conservative constituents adamantly returned him to office.

Although Meyer manages to capture the flavor of Marcantonio's personality, what emerges is less a conventional biography than an attempt to answer the question of why, out of the handful of Depression-era Congressmen on the far left, only Marcantonio was able to win re-election to term after term. What enabled Marcantonio to defy the "basic truism of American political life," which says that radical politicians "can only be elected under very special circumstances and then either move into the political mainstream or be defeated"?

Part of the answer lies in Marcantonio's relation to his constituents. The heart of his district was the area south of 125th Street between Third Avenue and the East River. Between 1920 and 1950, this was the largest Italian neighborhood in the United States, block after block of tenements housing immigrants and second-generation working-class families from Naples, Sorrento, Calabria and Sicily. Marcantonio lived his entire life within a three- or four-block radius of his birthplace on East 112th Street. Sharing a four-room apartment with his wife, mother, grandmother and brother, in all outward aspects he conformed to the southern Italian life style and mores. He maintained law offices on East 116th Street, was shaved every morning by the local barber, had his coffee with his political associates at a neighborhood cafe and bought his newspaper at the corner newsstand.

Marc's status as an insider was such that attacks on him as a Communist were largely perceived as attacks on the community at large. A dynamic speaker, he held rallies on election eve at 116th and Lexington that were, like Fiorello La Guardia's, communal celebrations; crowds of more than 15,000 people gathered under electric lights that spelled out "LUCKY CORNER—RE-ELECT MARCANTONIO" in fifteen-foot letters. When the polls closed there were bonfires and torch-lit processions through the streets of East Harlem.

For these people, as Meyer recognizes, "pragmatic and cultural concerns" outweighed "explicitly ideological issues." And Marcantonio understood from the beginning of his career that in a spectacularly inward-looking community like Italian Harlem, a politician was expected to function as an intermediary with the outside world.

The clubhouse of the Vito Marcantonio Political Association occupied the ground floor of a brownstone on 116th Street. When not in Washington, Marcantonio, assisted by a staff of lawyers and social workers, was available to meet his constituents, frequently as many as 300 a day. According to Meyer, Marcantonio was very much in the style of an old-fashioned padrone. A visitor who had waited until his or her number was called would be escorted to the platform where Marcantonio was seated. Without rising, Meyer notes, "he would give a limp handshake and greet his guest with the single query, 'What can I do for you?'" Listening, counseling, asking an occasional question in Italian, Spanish or Yiddish, Marcantonio tried to solve every problem, from obtaining city housing, finding jobs with the W.P.A. and dealing with immigration problems to filling out income tax forms and fixing parking tickets. Notoriously improvident, Marcantonio would often meet appeals for coal or medical expenses by reaching into his own pocket.

The political behavior of Italian-Americans during this period, Meyer argues, "evidenced a high degree of alienation from the major political institutions, indeed from the political process itself." A La Guardia protégé, Marcantonio benefited from the peculiar party structure that prevailed in the 20th Congressional District and the lack of any fixed allegiances: At various times he had the Democratic, Republican and A.L.P. nominations, sometimes all of them at once.

With the dissolution of these coalitions and attempts to gerrymander him out of existence by redrawing his district, the support of the Communist Party became crucial. Because Marcantonio's Congressional campaigns were the most expensive in New York and required enormous infusions of volunteers and cash, he could not have remained in office as long as he did without help from the C.P. and C.P.-dominated or allied organizations.

Although he was not a party member and appears to have resisted attempts to enlist him, a great number of his closest associates were Communists, and organizations like the A.L.P. and the International Labor Defense, in which Marcantonio was active, were firmly under party control by the late thirties. The pro-Mussolini sentiments of his East Harlem constituents had made it expedient for him to downplay his opposition to Italian Fascism. Similarly, the views of American Communists on foreign policy questions, which closely reflected those of the

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Soviet Union, were ones he could not afford to ignore. While there were a number of small divergences, his adherence to these positions was almost total.

Though he was subject throughout his career to scurrilous attacks, Marc's identification with the Communist Party was not one he ever sought to disavow or downplay. Nor did he hesitate to reinforce it by campaigning against the Dies Committee's hearings on "un-American activities," and by devoting most of his time after being voted out of office to representing W.E.B. Du Bois and defendants in Smith Act prosecutions.

Until the end, in 1954, when he dropped dead of a heart attack a few blocks from City Hall at the age of 52, he remained a committed advocate of the causes he'd always espoused; at the time he was laying the groundwork for a new campaign. And although Cardinal Spellman refused to allow a religious burial or a requiem to be sung, large crowds lined Third Avenue to see his coffin borne away.

Marcantonio accomplished what had not been realized anywhere else in the United States: "the mobilization of the latent rebelliousness of the Southern Italians." Yet in the end he failed to transform East Harlem's political culture in a lasting way; little of its radical tradition survived him—no organization, successor or even consistent set of political beliefs. This, in Meyer's judgment, was largely a consequence of Marcantonio's highly personalized politics. When Marcantonio died, he writes, "almost everything died with him." But then the community of Italian Harlem itself, though still a part of living memory, has disappeared, leaving few traces. The sixty volumes of Marcantonio papers, which Meyer found lying largely unexamined in the New York Public Library, and the book he has fashioned from them, are vivid and compelling reminders. □

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Chasing History

Laurie Stone

MAUS II: A Survivor's Tale. And Here My Troubles Began. By Art Spiegelman. Pantheon. 136 pp. \$18.

It has taken Art Spiegelman thirteen years to complete *Maus*, a memoir of his parents' survival of the Holocaust and his own journey from a barbarous childhood—years spent pinned beneath the hairy paw of his tyrannical father. With the publication of *Maus II*, the author/cartoonist has achieved a wondrously spare, fanciful and profound work of art, one that takes as accurate a measure of private anguish as of global nightmare. Imaginatively, delicately, Spiegelman meditates on the saving grace of perspective—knowing what is big and what is little as contexts shift. In the face of pain and defeat, his books attest, a sense of irony is the surest consolation, the steadiest provision for sanity.

Spiegelman's ruling conceit—drawing Jews as mice, Germans cats, Poles pigs, Americans dogs, etc.—is an ample field for playing with perspective, for it immediately points up the variable sizes and shapes characters can assume. The bestiary reflects the dual perspectives of the larger world and family trauma. From the perspective of children, all adults are potential cats: large, inscrutable, capricious and autocratic. From the perspective of Jews, Nazism brutally infantilizes: denying movement, self-will, privacy.

The *Maus* books are structured around conversations, Art winnowing out facts from his father, Vladek. Since Art's mother, Anja, committed suicide in 1968, Art has only his father's version of the past and, crimping him further, Vladek has burned Anja's diaries before the start of the project. Art and Vladek are in Queens and the Catskills, and then, as Vladek narrates, we shift to Poland, Germany, the camps. Past and present counterpoint each other, showing what in human hearts remains fixed and what can alter.

Art's tactic is to worry out loud about the tangles that his work then goes on to prove he's smoothed. Near the end of *Maus I*, he fears he's reduced his father not merely to a mouse but to a rat: a "racist caricature of the miserly old Jew." There are grounds for these alarms. He

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shows us a Vladek who is wealthy but steals paper towels from restrooms, a man who reuses tea bags, hoards wooden matches, pleads with a store manager to take back half-eaten packages of food.

Summering in the Catskills, Vladek is shrunken and mewling—a creature with no sense of the relative size of events. Everything ushers in panic. To insure that Art returns a phone call, he pretends to have a heart attack. When Art and his wife, Françoise, visit, he pressures them to stay, all the while arranging their clothes, cajoling them to eat his preferred foods, sputtering a racist slur in Yiddish when Françoise picks up a black hitchhiker. He rants about his second wife, Mala, who has left him after years of abuse and who he claims has robbed him. Like most bullies, he portrays himself as a victim, never as tormentor.

Still, even at his puniest, Vladek comes off so extreme and pumped, he bursts through stereotypes. He grabs readers by the lapels, lifts them off the ground and holds them in midair. Art has moved beyond the Oedipal contest to include compassion for Vladek even while shunning him. He's amused by the irony that his father is at his best when the world is at its worst, and in his books he generously restores Vladek to a stage where he can shine.

After Germany invades Poland and Vladek is tracked, he becomes resourceful and bold, all his genes coded with the imperative: Survive. He does, not in a skittering, mousy way but with a genius nose for danger and false reassurances. He escapes capture for years, distrusting phrases such as, "They're just checking papers." He hides himself and Anja in freezing barns and brashly walks the streets in search of food. Only one error has dire consequences: Believing that Jews are safer in Hungary, he arranges train passage with smugglers, who betray him and Anja to the Gestapo.

The two withstand ten months in concentration camps, Vladek in Auschwitz, where prisoners work and gradually starve to death, and Anja in adjacent Birkenau, most of whose inhabitants are quickly gassed. Vladek explains how, even amid the staggering cruelty of camp existence, culture persists in channels of communication and protection, acts of heroism and sacrifice.

For Vladek, though, survival mostly depends on luck and shrewdness. He