

Remembering Powell: Leadership Lessons from a Soldier, Patriot, and Statesmen



by Jay Jackson

With the passing of Colin Powell this week, I was reminded of how grateful I am for his “Thirteen Rules.” Described in Part I of his book [*It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership*](#), the principles Powell sets forth are clear and practical:

1. It ain’t as bad as you think! It will look better in the morning.
2. Get mad then get over it.
3. Avoid having your ego so close to your position that when your position falls, your ego goes with it.
4. It can be done.
5. Be careful what you choose. You may get it.
6. Don’t let adverse facts stand in the way of a good decision.

7. You can't make someone else's choices. You shouldn't let someone else make yours.
8. Check small things.
9. Share credit.
10. Remain calm. Be kind.
11. Have a vision. Be demanding.
12. Don't take counsel of your fears or naysayers.
13. Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.

I remember a story I heard early on in my career, not from Powell, but *about* him. It was part of a talk that [General Stephen Lorenz](#) would give on leadership. Lorenz explained that when he was assigned to the Pentagon, a major walked down the corridor with his grandmother and pointed out General Powell's office. At that moment, General Powell happened to come out and see the major (wearing his Joint Staff badge) with his grandmother, and he began gushing to the grandmother about her grandson. General Powell told the major's grandmother what an incredible job her grandson was doing and how he would not be able to do his job without him. Lorenz talked about how Powell—in maybe 30 seconds—made a difference in the lives of the major, his grandmother, and General Lorenz. General Lorenz's point was that it takes only a moment to make a difference.

That story stuck with me until I first came across Powell's Thirteen Rules and realized that kind of kindness was not a *side effect* of Powell's character, it was an intentional focus of his leadership philosophy.

The Thirteen Rules were especially useful to me during the most demanding (and rewarding) assignment of my career, on the staff of Joint Special Operations Command.

Sometimes the challenges we faced seemed insurmountable. *Rule #4 - It can be done.* We needed buy-in from other military and civilian organizations to accomplish our mission. *Rule #11 - Have a vision. Be demanding.* Coordinating and advocating for that buy-in was often grueling. *Rule #10 - Remain calm. Be kind.* And sometimes—a lot of the time—we didn't get what we wanted. *Rule #3 - Avoid having your ego so close to your position that when your position falls, your ego goes with it.*

At every level of professional military education, we are saturated with the wisdom of our forebearers. Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, Douhet, and Mitchell (the last two prominent at least for us Air Force guys). Honestly, I have forgotten much more of that wisdom than I remember. But Powell's Thirteen Rules have stuck with me. Clear, accessible, and practical, they should be on any professional's reading list.

Jay Jackson is an attorney in Omaha, Nebraska and an officer in the United States Air Force Reserve. He previously served fourteen years on active duty, including six deployments, before separating in 2020. Visit his [website](#), sign-up for his [email list](#), or connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)