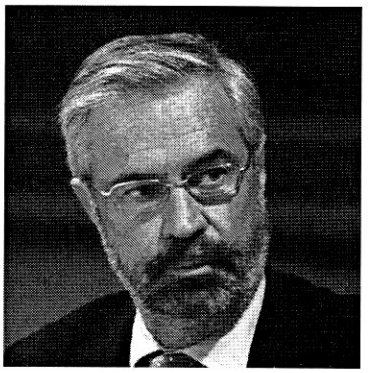
INTERVIEW



CHARLES POWELL

Historian, Professor of Modern History at the University of San Pablo and Academic Director of the Fundación Transición Española

Charles Powell was born in Madrid in 1960. He is the second child of Arthur and Julia Powell, who were the founders of Runnymede College which opened in Madrid in 1967. One of the early graduates of Runnymede, Charles went on to Oxford University where he studied Modern History. He also obtained a PhD. at Oxford studying under famed hispanist Sir Raymond Carr. Over the last 20 years Charles has written five books, co-authored one and co-edited another two. In 1991 he was awarded the coveted ***Premio Espejo de España*** *prize. Ten years later he wrote* ***España en Democracia, 1975-2000*** *which was published by Plaza & Janes. So successful was this book that Charles won the coveted* ***Así Fue*** *prize which was worth 60,000 Euros. He is currently a Professor of Modern History at San Pablo-CEU University in Madrid and is also the deputy director at the Real Instituto Elcano think-tank in Madrid. Despite his busy schedule Charles also finds time to serve as director of the* ***Fundación Transición Española*** *(www.transicion.org) a non-profit making organisation dedicated to the study of this period.*

You come from a family of educators. What made you decide to become a historian?

As your question implies, my father probably had a lot to do with it. He was always very historically-minded, and I remember him talking to me about Napoleon on my first visit to Paris, on our way to a son et lumiere show at Les Invalides. (Being the headmaster's son wasn't always easy, as you can imagine, but we were very fortunate to have a well-read father who actually enjoyed talking to us!). I was also very lucky to have some excellent History teachers at Runnymede, and a wonderful tutor at Oxford, Leslie Mitchell, who encouraged me to pursue my studies further.

We notice that your first three books were all about King Juan Carlos. So you must be an authority on the Spanish monarch. So let's start with the first book—*El piloto de cambio. El Rey, la monarquía y la transición a la democracia*--which you wrote in 1991 and was published by Editorial Planeta. Can you tell us about how you came to write this book?

El piloto del cambio is basically a Spanish version of my Oxford thesis on Spain's transition to democracy. Although the title may suggest otherwise, it is really a general interpretation of that process, and one which, I am proud to say, still reads quite well 20 years after it was first published. Although it has become fashionable in recent years to question the transition—as well as the monarchy and the king's role in the process—I am as convinced as ever that Juan Carlos made a crucial contribution to the overall success of the process of democratization. That is not to say, of course, that he managed the process single-handedly, or that other actors and forces were not equally or even more important. Clearly, it would be wrong to underestimate the importance of the social and economic changes that had taken place in the late Franco period, or to ignore the fact that many thousands of Spaniards were actively involved in the struggle for democracy. What interested me most in 1991, however, was to try to explain how the king had used the institutions and power he had inherited from Franco in steering the ship of state hence the title of the book—to a safe haven.

Charles Powell with Adolfo Suárez in 1998.

(Continued on page 17)

Historian Charles Powell was the guest speaker at the Madrid Council of the U.S. Navy League's dinner meeting held last month at the InterContinental Hotel. (Top) Rosa Lebouef, visiting from California, meets member José Canosa. (Below) Council President Nick Hayes thanks Charles Powell. An interview with the historian can be seen on page 5 of this issue.

CLUBS

Madrid Council of the U.S. Navy League

(Continued from page 5)

Four years later you wrote Juan Carlos *Un rey para la democracía.* Was this book based on a lot of material not used in the first one or is it very different?

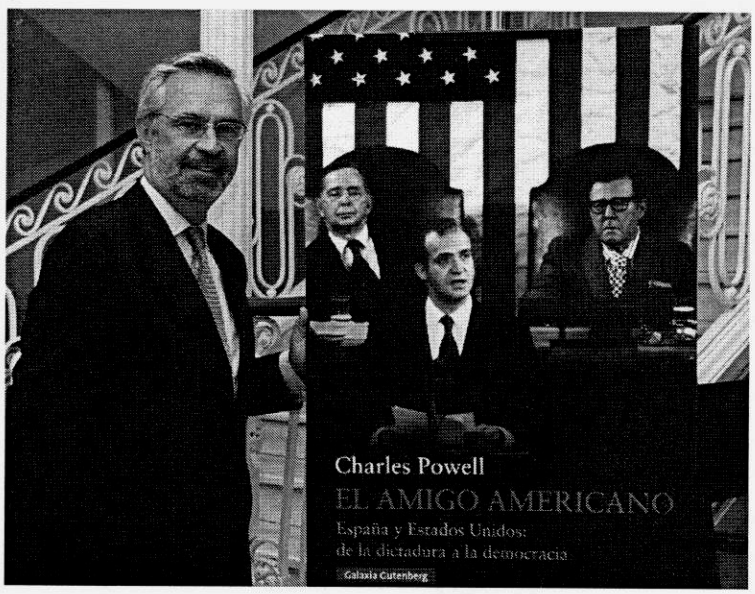
This book was different in that it is basically a political biography of Juan Carlos, and unlike ***El piloto del cambio***, which stopped in 1982, it covered the whole of his reign up to the mid-1990s. It also dealt with the king's role as Spain's highly successful ambassador-at-large, and looked at issues such as his relationship with the Catholic Church and his dealings with Catalonia and the Basque country. Shortly afterwards, I wrote an English version of this book, with the title ***Juan Carlos of Spain: Self-Made Monarch***, which is in fact the first English-language biography of the king ever published. It annoys me that it is out of print, because I often get requests from authors and readers from all over the world who are interested in finding out more about how monarchs can help steer their countries away from authoritarianism towards democracy. In recent months the so-called 'Arab spring' has rekindled interest in the Spanish experience, and I have met people from countries such as Morocco and Jordan who clearly feel their monarchs could learn something from King Juan Carlos.

Perhaps your most important book to date is *España en Democracia, 1975-2000*, published by Plaza & Janes (2001) which won the *Así Fue* prize and is considered to be the most complete study of this era. Were you surprised how well this book was received?

I was a little surprised, to be honest, but its success was probably due to the fact that it was the first study of its kind. I also have to say that I worked particular hard to make it as readable as possible, and I like to think that it appealed to the general reader, and not just university students or colleagues in academia. I enjoyed writing it because it allowed me to have my say (for the time being, at least!) on the democratic transition, a topic I had been working on for years, and I was also able to explore the Felipe González years (1982-1996) in considerable depth, and this was a period whose importance cannot be overestimated. The book also pays considerable attention to Spain's foreign policy, which has always interested me, and in particular the process leading to membership of NATO, which was highly controversial, and of the European Community, which was far less so. This is a period I would like to revisit, and I am toying with the idea of writing a book about the Aznar years (1996-2004), basically so as to try to make sense of his foreign policy and the decision to involve Spain in Iraq.

This brings us to 2004 and your book *Adolfo Suarez—The Self-Made President.*

Yes. This is a short biography of a key actor in Spain's recent political history. I have been writing about Suárez for more than 20 years now, and I still find him fascinating. Contrary to what most people seem to think, although we have a pretty good idea of what went on during this period, it is only very recently that many of the relevant documents have actually been declassified, both in Spain and elsewhere, and as they become available they will shed a great deal of new light on the likes of Suárez. If anything, I think people will give him greater credit, not less, for what he did for Spain during his difficult years in office (1976-1981).



Finally, *El Amigo Americano*, which is published by Galaxia Gutenberg and came out earlier this year and received rave reviews. Do you think readers will be in for many surprises when they read this book?

This is a book about the political and security relationship between Washington and Madrid in the period 1969-1989, and it is largely based on thousands of recently declassified documents, both Spanish and American. For the first time ever, readers will be able to see and understand how US policy towards Spain was designed and implemented, and thanks to the documents I have used, they will feel that they are sitting in on Kissinger's conversations with Franco and admiral Carrero Blanco, say, or ambassador Wells Stabler's meetings with Juan Carlos and Suárez. Much of this material had never been written about before, so I will be very disappointed if readers do not come away feeling they have come across something that is basically new to them!

Just one last question. Historians, when they write about politics and politicians, tend to receive criticism from either the left or the right depending on the readers's point of view. But somehow you appear to have come out unscathed which is a remarkable achievement for an historian. Do you think about potential criticism when writing a book?

To be honest, I don't always feel I have come out unscathed, but it's nice of you to say so! Seriously, though, I think the reason for this may be that, whether they agree with me or not, readers probably notice that I want to be honest with them: my main goal is to try to understand what happened, and why; I am much less interested in trying to get them to see things my way. Nevertheless, I do think about potential criticism as I write. One of the joys of studying recent events is that I have been able to meet many of the people I write about; however, this also means I have to worry about how they will react to what I have written about them! In general, I try to be respectful of the people I write about, particularly those I find it hardest to identify with, though I confess I don't always succeed in keeping my sense of irony totally under control!