From Analog Politics to Digital VC With General Colin Powell

By William Tremain

General Colin Powell became a venture capitalist after leaving public life and realizing one morning that his wife of 51 years, Alma, wasn’t just going to let him stay at home and sit around with nothing to do.

It wasn’t “sustainable,” he said. [Translation: She might have strangled him.]

The former Secretary of State, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and decorated Vietnam veteran is now a limited partner with renowned Silicon Valley venture firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers—a line of work that is helping with a personal change.

“I was born analog—desperately trying to become digital all these years,” Powell said, adding that his grandchildren educate him about technology—texts, tweets and more. “But I’m pedaling as fast as I can to keep up with these kids or else I’ll lose them,” he said, in a speech at the National Venture Capital Association’s VentureScape conference Wednesday.

This personal transition must seem at least a little familiar. Powell had overseen a massive technology changeover at the U.S. State Department early in the new millennium, revamping “the hardware, the software and the brainware” in the department to take it from Wang computers to more than 44,000 brand new desktop machines and onto email for always-on communication.

But the perils of newly adopted technology became apparent with the rise of PDAs. Powell found out that younger male staff members at the State Department were using Blackberrys as “chick magnets,” he said—which he didn’t look upon favorably.

Powell clearly relishes his new role as a technology investor helping bring new ideas to life. “I love being a part of your world,” Powell said to the venture capitalists in the audience.

“The reality of it all is that you are playing one of the most essential purposes in our economic system...without you our system wouldn’t be working properly. Give yourself credit for what you’ve done over the years,” in guiding business ideas from the proverbial startups in garages to thriving companies, he said.

President Ronald Reagan once gave Powell a photo on which was written, “Dear Colin, If you say so, I know it’s true,” Powell said. “He was saying, ‘I trust you.’” Keeping an enterprise of any size going, he said, requires that trust. “It’s the glue that holds the organization together.”

“You not only get [companies] up in the air, but you teach them how to fly once they’re up there—you teach them how to navigate,” he said. “You’re not just doing it for profit, certainly I’m not against that. But you’re really doing it to bring something new into the economy.”
Economic growth should be the country’s primary concern, Powell said. “It’s what we have to do a better job of. And you guys are the very beginning of the whole process…”

And a growing economy is more than a U.S. concern, Powell said. “As nations create wealth, they don’t look for trouble. They bring people up out of poverty…So let’s focus on world economic growth.”