

■ Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" Address at the 1984 Democratic National Convention

Date: July 17, 1984

Author: Jesse Jackson

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

The political activist Jesse Jackson embodies many liberal ideals through his lifelong advocacy for civil rights, racial equality, and social justice. He emphasizes the importance of equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of race or background, and works to dismantle systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Jackson's efforts in fighting economic justice, voting rights, and housing equality reflect the liberal belief in the government's role in promoting fairness and protecting individual rights.

On July 17, 1984, Jackson gave a passionate speech to the Democratic National Convention. Relying heavily on religious imagery, Jackson argued that the Democratic presidential nominee must make the fight to reduce poverty, hunger, homelessness, unemployment, and inequalities in education a central element of his campaign. Jackson had campaigned for the nomination, and he emphasized that many of his supporters had to struggle with these challenges. The Democratic nominee, whether former Vice President Walter Mondale or Senator Gary Hart, must appeal to these voters by effectively addressing these issues. Only effective and courageous leadership "can part the waters and lead our nation in the direction of the Promised Land."

Defining Moment

When Jackson launched his campaign to become the Democratic Party's presidential nominee in 1984, he became the first African American since New York Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, who sought the party's nomination in 1972, to seek the nomination of one of the two major political parties.

At the start of his campaign, Jackson was viewed as a fringe candidate with limited appeal. Describing his supporters as a "Rainbow Coalition," he hoped to create a broad coalition including members of the African American community, other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, farmers, members of the gay community, working-class whites, and progressives. Jackson's platform included a single-payer health care



Jesse Jackson. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

plan, the creation of a huge infrastructure building program, ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, a reversal of tax cuts for the richest Americans, defense budget cuts, and the naming of South Africa as a rogue nation.

Jackson's efforts to create a "Rainbow Coalition" met certain obstacles. In an interview with a Black *Washington Post* reporter, Jackson used an ethnic slur when referring to the Jewish community in New York City. He initially refused to apologize, further damaging his relationship with American Jews.

Jackson also struggled to gain the support of other African American leaders. Such prominent civil rights leaders as Julian Bond, Coretta Scott King, and Andrew Young refused to endorse him. Young, who was mayor of Atlanta at the time, argued that African Americans should spread their support among various candidates to ensure they had a level of influence no matter who won. Benjamin Hooks, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), argued that African Americans should support whichever candidate was most likely to defeat incumbent President Ronald Reagan.

In reality, Jackson had little chance of gaining the nomination, but he proved he was not a fringe candidate. He received more than 3.6 million votes, 18.2 percent of the total vote and third place overall in primary contests. Notably, he won primaries in

Washington, D.C., Louisiana, South Carolina, and he split the vote in Mississippi. His victories made him the first African American to win a state presidential primary. This raised Jackson's profile substantially and gained him a prominent speaking role at the 1984 Democratic National Convention.

Author Biography

Jesse Jackson was born on October 8, 1941 in Greenville, South Carolina. While attending North Carolina A&T in Greensboro, North Carolina, he became heavily involved in the civil rights movement. During a visit to Greenville on July 17, 1960, Jackson and seven other African American men conducted a sit-in at the local library to protest segregation ordinances. As a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Jackson participated in the Selma to Montgomery March in March 1965. He was ordained a minister in 1968. He was later placed in charge of SCLC operations in Chicago. In 1971, after a fallout with other SCLC leaders, Jackson formed his own organization, People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), to fight for racial equality and other social justice causes. After his 1984 campaign for the nomination, he established another organization known as the Rainbow Coalition. In 1996 Jackson merged the two organizations into one, The Rainbow/PUSH.



Historical Document

"Rainbow Coalition" Address at the 1984 Democratic National Convention

Tonight we come together bound by our faith in a mighty God, with genuine respect and love for our country, and inheriting the legacy of a great party, the Democratic Party, which is the best hope for redirecting our nation on a more humane, just, and peaceful course. This is not a perfect party. We're not a perfect people. Yet, we are called to a perfect mission. Our mission to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to house the homeless, to teach the illiterate, to provide jobs for the jobless, and to choose the human race over the nuclear race.

We are gathered here this week to nominate a candidate and adopt a platform which will expand, unify, direct, and inspire our party and the nation to fulfill this mission. My constituency is the desperate, the damned, the disinherited, the disrespected, and the despised. They are restless and seek release. They have voted in record numbers. They've invested the faith, hope, and trust that they have in us. The Democratic Party must send them a signal that we care. I pledge my best not to let them down.

There is the call of conscience, redemption, expansion, healing, and unity. Leadership must heed the call of conscience, redemption, expansion, healing, and unity, for they are the key to achieving our mission. Time is neutral and does not change things. With courage and initiative, leaders change things. No generation can choose the age or circumstance in which it is born, but through leadership it can choose to make the age in which it is born an age of enlightenment, an age of jobs, peace, and justice.

Only leadership, that intangible combination of gifts, the discipline, information, circumstance, courage, timing, will, and divine inspiration can lead us out of the crisis in which we find ourselves. Leadership can mitigate the misery of our nation. The leadership can part the waters and lead our nation in the direction of the Promised Land. Leadership can lift the boats stuck at the bottom.

I've had the rare opportunity to watch seven men and then two, pour out their souls, offer their service and heal, and heed the call of duty to direct the course of our nation. There was a proper season for everything. There was a time to sow and a time to reap. There's a time to compete and a time to cooperate. I asked for your vote on the first ballot as a vote for a new direction for this party and this nation. A vote of conviction, a vote of conscience.

But I will be proud to support the nominee of this convention for the President of the United States of America. I have watched the leadership of our party develop and grow. My respect for both Mr. Mondale and Mr. Hart is great. I've watched them struggle with the crosswinds and crossfires of being public servants. I believe they will both continue to try to serve us faithfully. I'm elated by the knowledge that for the first time in our history a woman, Geraldine Ferraro, will be recommended to share our ticket.

Throughout this campaign, I've tried to offer leadership to the Democratic Party and the nation. If in my high moments, I have done some good, offered some service, shared some light, healed some wounds, rekindled some hope, or stirred someone from apathy and indifference, or in any way along the way helped somebody, then this campaign has not been in vain. For friends who loved and cared for me, for a God who spared me, and for a family who understood, I'm eternally grateful.

If in my low moments, in word, deed, or attitude, through some error of temper, taste, or tone, I've caused anyone discomfort, created pain, or revived someone's fears, that was not my truest self. If there were occasions when my grape turned into a raisin, and my joy bell lost its resonance, please forgive me. Charge it to my head and not to my heart.

[Source: www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/rainbow-coalition-speech-transcribe-at-1984-dnc-jesse-jackson.]



Document Analysis

Jesse Jackson addressed the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco on July 17, 1984. His speech should be understood in the context of his surprise run to gain the Democratic Party's nomination for president. Initially seen as a marginal candidate, Jackson placed third in the primaries behind Senator Gary Hart and the eventual nominee, former Vice President Walter Mondale.

Jackson begins by acknowledging that everyone at the convention is linked by their love for God, the United States, and the Democratic Party. Continuing with his religiously themed message, Jackson notes that the Democratic Party is called upon to "feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to house the homeless, to teach the illiterate, to provide jobs for the jobless, and to choose the human race over the nuclear race."

The purpose of the Convention is to select a candidate who best exemplifies this important mission. Jackson argues that he knows something about delivering this message of hope as his "constituency is the desperate, the damned, the disinherited, the disrespected, and the despised." He points out that these "constituents" have voted in record numbers during the primaries. As a result, the Democratic Party and its chosen candidate for the presidency must address their concerns and needs effectively. Jackson argues that courageous leadership is needed to lead the nation out of its current crises and into a new "age of enlightenment, an age of jobs, peace, and justice."

During the primaries, Jackson notes that he watched seven other candidates "pour out their souls." Only he, Walter Mondale, and Gary Hart remain. Paraphrasing Ecclesiastes, Jackson asserts that there "was a proper season for everything. There was a time to sow and a time to reap. There is a time to compete and a time to cooperate." Now is the time to select a candidate and unify the party behind him.

Jackson asserts that he is proud to support the Democratic nominee for president whether it is Mondale or Hart. He also expresses his support for Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro as the vice-presidential nominee. She would become the first female vice-presidential candidate of a major party in American history.

Jackson concludes with some brief comments on his own candidacy. He recalls that if his candidacy managed to heal any wounds, provide any form of hope, or address any previously ignored issues, then it was all worth it. Lastly, he offers an apology for any discomfort or pain he may have caused in his campaign.

Essential Themes

In his speech Jackson never stated whether he preferred Mondale or Hart. In what was likely an attempt to ensure he had some influence with the eventual nominee, Jackson declared his support for both. Mondale would ultimately secure the nomination. As Jackson suggested, Mondale did choose Ferraro as his vice-presidential nominee. However, the Mondale/Ferraro ticket was not successful in the general election. They were defeated handily by incumbent Ronald Reagan, who won the popular vote by a large margin (58 percent to the Democrats' 40 percent). In the Electoral College, Mondale won only Washington, D.C., and his home state of Minnesota, which he won by less than 4,000 votes.

Ironically, while Jackson proved to have little influence on the party's platform or the results of the general election, his campaign for the nomination raised his profile significantly. This occurred in no small part to his speech at the convention, which was viewed favorably by both the crowd in the convention hall and the television audience at home. Jackson's speech, which lasted roughly 50 minutes, was viewed by more Americans than any other speech during the convention. By its conclusion, 33 million Americans were watching, giving some credence to Jackson's claim that his candidacy and platform had the potential to attract new voters.

Additionally, Jackson's progressive platform, which was not adopted by the Democratic Party, proved a significant contrast not only to the conservatism of Ronald Reagan's Republican Party, but also to the more centrist position of Mondale or Hart. The political coalition he sought to create was a restatement of the New Deal coalition, but also an enlargement of it.

Significantly, Jackson's relative success during the 1984 presidential primary encouraged him to try

again four years later. Eventually losing the nomination to Michael Dukakis, the governor of Massachusetts, Jackson's 1988 run for the nomination was even more successful. He received more than 6.9 million votes and 1,023 delegates in the primaries, good enough for second place.

—Gerald F. Goodwin, PhD

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