

■ Barbara Jordan's Keynote Address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention

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Author: Barbara Jordan

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

Barbara Jordan was a highly influential figure and is often regarded as a liberal icon. She was a trailblazing African American lawyer, professor, and politician who served as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas. Jordan was known for her eloquent speeches, her advocacy for civil rights, social justice, and integrity in government.

During the Democratic National Convention in New York City in the summer of 1976, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan of Texas—the first African American woman from a southern state elected to the House of Representatives—took to the stage of the to deliver the keynote address. Given the national trauma wrought by the Watergate Affair, Jordan cited the Democratic Party's image—one of inclusiveness and innovation—as the reason Americans were looking to the party to move the United States forward after two terms of Republican leadership in the White House. Acknowledging, however, that both the Democratic and Republican parties had made many mistakes in previous years, Jordan said that all elected officials should lead by moral and ethical example. Leaders, she added, should join together with all Americans to create a national community committed to moving the United States forward once again.

Defining Moment

One of the most politically tumultuous periods in modern U.S. history was the decade between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. During this time, U.S. military involvement in Vietnam reached its peak, along with antiwar protests at home and an insurgent counterculture that seemed to strain the nation's social fabric. The civil rights movement saw great victories, but the decade also witnessed the assassinations of major national leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. When President Richard M. Nixon took office in 1969, he pledged to bring "peace with honor" to the Vietnam conflict, working to turn responsibility for the fighting increasingly over to the South Vietnamese. By the time a cease-fire was negotiated during the Paris talks in 1973, however, 58,000 Americans had been killed in action and over



Barbara Jordan. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

150,000 had been wounded in the conflict, which ultimately ended in a Communist victory.

In June of 1972, five men were arrested breaking into and attempting to bug the Democratic National Committee's offices at Washington, D.C.'s Watergate Hotel. During the months that followed, more and more of Nixon's staff were found to be connected to the break-in as a major political conspiracy unfolded, pointing increasingly toward the involvement of the president himself. Over the course of several months into Nixon's second term, more and more of his aides and appointees resigned over the scandal while nationally televised Senate hearings on Watergate again dominated American viewers' attention. In 1973, Vice President Spiro T. Agnew resigned under suspicion of tax evasion and bribery, and Nixon named Congressman Gerald Ford to be his new vice president. In 1974, Nixon, threatened with impeachment proceedings on suspicion of attempting to cover up the Watergate scandal, resigned from office, leaving Ford as his successor. Ford put forth a valiant effort as president—particularly in the fight against inflation—but his pardon of Nixon and his inability to unify a toxic political environment in Washington led to calls for new blood in the White House. In 1976, Ford faced a daunting reelection campaign, as Democrats put forth as their candidate a relative political outsider:

Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. During the summer of 1976, the Democratic Party held its nominating convention at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

Author Biography

Barbara Charline Jordan was born on February 21, 1936, in Houston, Texas. Educated in Houston public schools, Jordan graduated from Texas Southern University in 1956 and from Boston University School of Law in 1959. Inspired by her work on John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign, Jordan unsuccessfully ran twice for the Texas House of Representatives, in 1962 and 1964. In 1966, however, she was successful in running for the Texas Senate. The first African American in the United States since 1883 to win a state senate seat, Jordan rose to the rank of president pro tempore. In 1972, Jordan was victorious in her campaign for U.S. House of Representatives, garnering 80 percent of the vote. In 1974, she was among the members of the House Judiciary Committee to support articles of impeachment against President Nixon. She remained in office until 1979, stepping down after three terms to teach at the University of Texas at Austin. Jordan died from complications of leukemia on January 17, 1996.



Historical Document

Barbara Jordan's Keynote Address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention

Thank you ladies and gentlemen for a very warm reception.

It was one hundred and forty-four years ago that members of the Democratic Party first met in convention to select a Presidential candidate. Since that time, Democrats have continued to convene once every four years and draft a party platform and nominate a Presidential candidate. And our meeting this week is a continuation of that tradition. But there is something different about tonight. There is something special about tonight. What is different? What is special?

I, Barbara Jordan, am a keynote speaker.

When—A lot of years passed since 1832, and during that time it would have been most unusual for any national political party to ask a Barbara Jordan to deliver a keynote address. But tonight, here I am. And I feel—I feel that notwithstanding the past that my presence here is one additional bit of evidence that the American Dream need not forever be deferred.

Now—Now that I have this grand distinction, what in the world am I supposed to say? I could easily spend this time praising the accomplishments of this party and attacking the Republicans—but I don't choose to do that. I could list the many problems which Americans have. I could list the problems which cause people to feel cynical, angry, frustrated: problems which include lack of integrity in government; the feeling that the individual no longer counts; the reality of material and spiritual poverty; the feeling that the grand American experiment is failing or has failed. I could recite these problems, and then I could sit down and offer no solutions. But I don't choose to do that either. The citizens of America expect more. They deserve and they want more than a recital of problems.

We are a people in a quandary about the present. We are a people in search of our future. We are a people in search of a national community. We are a people trying not only to solve the problems of the present, unemployment, inflation, but we are attempting on a larger scale to fulfill the promise of America. We are attempting to fulfill our national purpose, to create and sustain a society in which all of us are equal.

Throughout—Throughout our history, when people have looked for new ways to solve their problems and to uphold the principles of this nation, many times they have turned to political parties. They have often turned to the Democratic Party. What is it? What is it about the Democratic Party that makes it the instrument the people use when they search for ways to shape their future? Well I believe the answer to that question lies in our concept of governing. Our concept of governing is derived from our view of people. It is a concept deeply rooted in a set of beliefs firmly etched in the national conscience of all of us.

Now what are these beliefs? First, we believe in equality for all and privileges for none. This is a belief—This is a belief that each American, regardless of background, has equal standing in the public forum—all of us. Because—Because we believe this idea so firmly, we are an inclusive rather than an exclusive party. Let everybody come.

I think it no accident that most of those immigrating to America in the 19th century identified with the Democratic Party. We are a heterogeneous party made up of Americans of diverse backgrounds. We believe that the people are the source of all governmental power; that the authority of the people is to be extended, not restricted.

This—This can be accomplished only by providing each citizen with every opportunity to participate in the management of the government. They must have that, we believe. We believe that the government which represents the authority of all the people, not just one interest group, but all the people, has an obligation to actively—underscore actively—seek to remove those obstacles which would block individual achievement—obstacles emanating from race, sex, economic condition. The government must remove them, seek to remove them.

We are a party—We are a party of innovation. We do not reject our traditions, but we are willing to adapt to changing circumstances, when change we must. We are willing to suffer the discomfort of change in order to achieve a better future. We have a positive vision of the future founded on the belief that the gap between the promise and reality of America can one day be finally closed. We believe that.

This, my friends is the bedrock of our concept of governing. This is a part of the reason why Americans have turned to the Democratic Party. These are the foundations upon which a national community can be built. Let all understand that these guiding principles cannot be discarded for short-term political gains. They represent what this country is all about. They are indigenous to the American idea. And these are principles which are not negotiable.

In other times—In other times, I could stand here and give this kind of exposition on the beliefs of the Democratic Party and that would be enough. But today that is not enough. People want more. That is not sufficient reason for the majority of the people of this country to decide to vote Democratic. We have made mistakes. We realize that. We admit our mistakes. In our haste to do all things for all people, we did not foresee the full consequences of our actions. And when the people raised their voices, we didn't hear. But our deafness was only a temporary condition, and not an irreversible condition.

Even as I stand here and admit that we have made mistakes, I still believe that as the people of America sit in judgment on each party, they will recognize that our mistakes were mistakes of the heart. They'll recognize that.

And now—now we must look to the future. Let us heed the voice of the people and recognize their common sense. If we do not, we not only blaspheme our political heritage, we ignore the common ties that bind all Americans. Many fear the future. Many are distrustful of their leaders, and believe that their voices are never heard. Many seek only to satisfy their private work—wants; to satisfy their private interests. But this is the great danger America faces—that we will cease to be one nation and become instead a collection of interest groups: city against suburb, region against region, individual against individual; each seeking to satisfy private wants. If that happens, who then will speak for America? Who then will speak for the common good?

This is the question which must be answered in 1976: Are we to be one people bound together by common spirit, sharing in a common endeavor; or will we become a divided nation? For all of its uncertainty, we cannot flee the future. We must not become the "New Puritans" and reject our society. We must address and master the future together. It can be done if we restore the belief that we share a sense of national community, that we share a common national endeavor. It can be done.

There is no executive order; there is no law that can require the American people to form a national community. This we must do as individuals, and if we do it as individuals, there is no President of the United States who can veto that decision.

As a first step—As a first step, we must restore our belief in ourselves. We are a generous people, so why can't we be generous with each other? We need to take to heart the words spoken by Thomas Jefferson:

Let us restore the social intercourse—"Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and that affection without which liberty and even life are but dreary things."

A nation is formed by the willingness of each of us to share in the responsibility for upholding the common good. A government is invigorated when each one of us is willing to participate in shaping the future of this nation. In this election year, we must define the “common good” and begin again to shape a common future. Let each person do his or her part. If one citizen is unwilling to participate, all of us are going to suffer. For the American idea, though it is shared by all of us, is realized in each one of us.

And now, what are those of us who are elected public officials supposed to do? We call ourselves “public servants” but I’ll tell you this: We as public servants must set an example for the rest of the nation. It is hypocritical for the public official to admonish and exhort the people to uphold the common good if we are derelict in upholding the common good. More is required—More is required of public officials than slogans and handshakes and press releases. More is required. We must hold ourselves strictly accountable. We must provide the people with a vision of the future.

If we promise as public officials, we must deliver. If—If we as public officials propose, we must produce. If we say to the American people, “It is time for you to be sacrificial”—sacrifice. If the public official says that, we [public officials] must be the first to give. We must be. And again, if we make mistakes, we must be willing to admit them. We have to do that. What we have to do is strike a balance between the idea that government should do everything and the idea, the belief, that government ought to do nothing. Strike a balance.

Let there be no illusions about the difficulty of forming this kind of a national community. It’s tough, difficult, not easy. But a spirit of harmony will survive in America only if each of us remembers that we share a common destiny; if each of us remembers, when self-interest and bitterness seem to prevail, that we share a common destiny.

I have confidence that we can form this kind of national community.

I have confidence that the Democratic Party can lead the way.

I have that confidence.

We cannot improve on the system of government handed down to us by the founders of the Republic. There is no way to improve upon that. But what we can do is to find new ways to implement that system and realize our destiny.

Now I began this speech by commenting to you on the uniqueness of a Barbara Jordan making a keynote address. Well I am going to close my speech by quoting a Republican President and I ask you that as you listen to these words of Abraham Lincoln, relate them to the concept of a national community in which every last one of us participates:

“As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master.” This—This—“This expresses my idea of Democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no Democracy.”

Thank you.



Document Analysis

Barbara Jordan understood the momentum her party enjoyed at this juncture of the presidential campaign. The American public perceived the incumbent, President Ford, as someone who had made a number of missteps. However, those stumbles were by far overshadowed by both the missteps of Ford's predecessor and the upheavals of the previous decade. Thus, her speech to the delegates is one that called for new leadership but, more importantly, calls for the nation to turn the page, reunite, and get back on track toward a positive future.

Jordan begins her speech by noting the significance of her own presence as the DNC keynote speaker. While not mentioning her race or gender—or, indeed, mentioning any specific political or social issues facing the nation, in a speech meant more to set a tone than lay out an agenda—she observes that “my presence here is one additional bit of evidence that the American Dream need not forever be deferred.” She then notes the political opportunity her party had before it. The Democrats could use this convention for “attacking the Republicans” for the scandals and inequities that plague the American political landscape. However, Jordan says that Americans “want more than a recital of problems.”

She notes instead that Americans, as a result of the current environment, are in a “quandary” about the American way of life. The United States was built on a solid foundation, she says, but the people are concerned about the direction in which the nation is moving. It is not just a question of the specific issues of unemployment or inflation; it is a larger question of how American society can move toward the promise of being a nation of equality.

On this point, Jordan says, the Democratic Party is well-equipped to restore the people's faith in governing. Democrats, she argues, long held a “concept of governing” driven by the principle of “equality for all and privileges for none.” Democrats espouse an inclusive, rather than exclusive, philosophy built on a respect for diversity. In other words, Jordan says, government should be driven by the will of all Americans, regardless of their race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, Jordan argues, the Democratic Party aims to use this heterogeneity to create innovative policies that will better serve the country over the long term. Democrats are “willing to suffer the discomfort of change in order to achieve a better future.” In order to move out of the morass of the previous decade, the United States needs the innovation and vision of the Democratic Party, she says.

Several times in the speech, Jordan invokes the theme of building a “national community,” one that could not be legislated but will have to be created by individuals coming together. She speaks to a need to reunite an American society that had been for years deeply divided. As a result of these divisions, Americans are at risk of diverging into smaller adversarial interest groups. It is, therefore, imperative that Americans reconnect as one society, accepting responsibility for one another and pursuing a common good. A high ethical standard needs to be established, particularly among the nation's public servants and elected officials, she says. She closes by quoting Abraham Lincoln—the first Republican president—on the spirit of democracy: “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master,” urging Americans to relate this idea to the task of building an inclusive national community.

Essential Themes

After nearly a decade of enormous challenges, including the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, the Democratic National Convention looked to retake the White House from the Republicans. Barbara Jordan did not rail against the specific missteps of the previous administration. Rather, she called upon the nation's leaders to be a shining example for others to follow. She also extolled what she saw as the characteristics that made her party appealing to the voters: inclusiveness, diversity, and innovation. Such characteristics, she argued, made the Democratic Party the ideal vehicle to move the nation through the challenges of the day.

Jordan also called for national healing. Striking an optimistic tone, Jordan argued for the forging of a new national community that would underpin a restored faith in American government. Everyone had a part to play, she argued, to build upon what she saw as a

near-perfect system of government. Doing so, Jordan exclaimed, would help move the United States closer to its destiny.

—*Michael P. Auerbach, MA*

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