
Julius Lester

You Can't Go Home Again

Critical Thoughts About Jesse Jackson

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For a somewhat different analysis of the Jackson campaign, see the article by Joseph Clark in the Summer 1984 Dissent. — Eds.

It was an exercise in '60s nostalgia. "Our time has come!" he shouted from the pulpits of black churches and the campaign stump. "Our time has come!"

It was a cry reminiscent of the "Freedom Now" chant of the early civil rights movement, one recast and sung by Jim Morrison and the Doors in the late '60s as, "We want the world and we want it now!" Both chants may or may not have been effective mass psychology, but neither had any relation to effective politics. Neither did "Our time has come!"

Jesse Jackson's race for power (disguised as a presidential candidacy) was taken more seriously than it might have been because he was black. (One could call blackness "the inherent intimidation factor.") An unfortunate legacy of the '60s has been an almost total, moral abdication on the part of whites where anything black is concerned. Having been told that they are "racists," that they cannot understand black culture, most whites take refuge (publicly, at least) in patronizing and pitying blacks, accepting, excusing, and rationalizing actions, attitudes, and words they would not accept from nonblacks.

Jackson is now making history [trumpeted the *New York Times*], not as a black Presidential candidate but as a "serious" black Presidential candidate. That development alone is likely to have far-reaching effects on the American political scene by energizing the black vote and by altering the perceptions among whites of black candidates for elective office. [Quoted in *Playboy*, June 1984.]

Such enthusiastic paternalism made the Jackson candidacy almost unassailable. (The truth is that FDR and JFK "energized" the black vote like no others in American history, and if "the perceptions among whites of black candidates" had not already changed, there would not be so many black mayors.) Paternalism was nowhere more evident than in how well the media allowed Jackson to survive his "Hymie/Hymietown" gaffe and his association with Minister Farrakhan. Mondale and Hart would not have survived making references to "nigger" or "niggertown," or associations with reactionary white extremists, if for no other reason than that blacks would have gone to war! Jackson and the black community, however, were patronized by white liberals and the media, told, in effect, "You do not have to conform to the same ethical stan-

dards required of everyone else in our society.” The consequences of being given an immoral license remain to be seen, but consequences there will be.

But in an age when the “show-biz factor” permeates American life, and presidential candidates are judged as much on that as their programs, Jackson’s blackness, sex appeal, and messianic oratory allowed him to walk around in public “with no clothes on” and not even a child pointed it out.

One is not sure if there is more to Jackson than show business and a drive to power. Since the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., he has been running for the position of heir apparent, which he began to achieve with his 1979 trip to Israel and Lebanon. The trip, being photographed embracing Yasir Arafat, his pro-PLO statements and anti-Semitic statements may have made him anathema to Jews, but blacks saw one of their own—handsome, well-dressed, articulate—making pronouncements on foreign policy and meeting with world leaders. Suddenly, he was more than a Chicago-based, charismatic black minister who headed a quasi-political organization. He had become a symbol.

A person who assumes the role of Deliverer becomes the repository for the dreams and aspirations of his group. He articulates the anguish and carries the hopes for salvation. The messianic element enters politics only when a people’s despair is so total that they can conceive of no other alternative to hopelessness, and the ’70s and ’80s have not been good for many blacks. Unemployment of depression proportions, loss of real income, and the Reagan budget cuts were a cruel follow-up to the hopes raised in the ’60s. Combining an expressed concern for the poor and the dispossessed with a perceived international standing, Jackson became a symbol that the Promised Land was still possible for those who had almost forgotten it existed.

WHEN JACKSON ANNOUNCED for the presidency, hopes and dreams were unleashed as they had not been since the ’60s. That those dreams and hopes were only going to be toyed with was apparent from the moment Jackson said he was going to create a “Rainbow Coalition.” (After all, who can hate a rainbow with its pot of gold at the end?) A romantic phrase with overtones of the ’60s, it seemed to promise a political Woodstock, the creation of a People’s Park, or a perpetual March on Washing-

ton. It was also a phrase with cultural associations. Was Jackson telling us that he was the new Wizard of Oz, and was I the only one who kept expecting Judy Garland to appear at a Jackson rally singing, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*?

“Rainbow Coalition” also had racial overtones, despite Jackson’s insistence that it was “not an ethnic march, [but] a political movement to pull together the strength of rejected groups . . . to serve more effectively and be served better by their Government.” (*Playboy*, June 1984.)

Jackson’s explanation ignored a fundamental lesson of American history: a coalition of “rejected groups” has never brought about social change. Only when “rejected groups” are joined in a coalition by liberals and radicals from established groups has change occurred. The civil rights movement was successful in fighting segregation and acquiring voting rights for blacks (and many others) only as long as that movement was composed of blacks together with liberal and radical whites. When “the movement” went its black separatist way, its political effectiveness came to an abrupt end. The very concept on which Jackson’s candidacy was based limited its appeal, insuring Jackson the black vote and nothing else.

From the concept came another point of confusion: Jackson never seemed clear as to who he was. As one member of the Congressional Black Caucus, who did not want to be identified, put it, “The problem with Jesse is that he doesn’t know what he wants to be, a politician making compromises or a civil rights leader saying ‘I demand justice.’” (*New York Times*, July 20, 1984.) Jackson seemed to want to be Martin Luther King and Adam Clayton Powell, a feat of prestidigitation that would have been unparalleled in American history. (One also began to wonder if he became possessed by Henry Kissinger fantasies, as he brought Lt. Robert Goodman out of Syria, prisoners out of Cuba, and tried to negotiate peace in El Salvador.) He talked alternately in the specifics of politics—the budget, foreign policy, and so on—and in the language of a moral crusade. “The rainbow is a moral cause, not just a political campaign” (*New York Times*, July 1, 1984).

Any claim Jackson may have had to moral leadership was tarnished by his “Hymie/Hymietown” remark, and damaged by his initial denials and belated admission of guilt. He showed himself

to be, not a moral leader, but a run-of-the-mill politician who, when caught with his foot in his mouth, instinctively denies that it is his foot. But anyone who had followed Jackson's career knew that he was a walking repository of anti-Jewish clichés.

Even when explaining that he was not anti-Semitic, he demonstrated the contrary. Jackson claimed that the term "Hymie" did not have a "negative meaning to it, either politically or religiously. It was an unfortunate use of words, but no different from someone saying he's going up to Harlem to see 'Mose' or 'Mosela.' You know, said with a lighthearted ring." (*Playboy*, June 1984.) How would Jackson (and other blacks) have responded if Gary Hart had announced he was "going up to Harlem to see 'Mose' or 'Mosela' "? And, interestingly, Jackson got on his racial high horse when Bill Moyers referred to him as the "Kingfish of politics," and then had to dismount in embarrassment when Moyers explained that he was referring to the former governor of Louisiana, Huey Long, and not the character on the late *Amos n' Andy* show.

Jackson's claims to a morally superior leadership were destroyed by his association with Minister Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, who worked as diligently at being anti-Semitic as Julius Streicher. It was an interesting relationship to speculate about, because, from an objective political point of view, Jackson did not need him. Yet Jackson felt that he did. Why? The reason given by Thomas N. Todd, Jackson's successor at Operation PUSH and the man who brought Jackson and Farrakhan together, is that it was an opportunity to put an end to splits in black America between black civil rights leaders and black nationalists. (Reported in the *New York Times*, June 30, 1984.)

Such specious reasoning has plagued black American history for more than a century. This "race philosophy" is based on the premise that blackness is the overriding political principle to create black unity. It is a reactionary nationalism, which appeals to the lowest common denominator.

But throughout his campaign, Jackson changed masks as it seemed to suit him, and became a race leader, moral figure, and politician by turns. The result was that he awoke one morning with Farrakhan around his neck like an albatross. There is no doubt that the moral giants of black history—

Douglass, Du Bois, King—would not have been associated with a Farrakhan. Each took the risk in his political career of articulating positions contrary to the prevailing black ethos, and each took it because he placed ethical principles above race.

Once Jackson accepted Farrakhan, he could not repudiate him for fear of losing credibility in the black community. This is not meant to imply that even those blacks to whom Jackson had a visceral appeal were Farrakhan supporters. But the psychology of the race philosophy demands a rallying around the black flag when a prominent black is attacked by whites. (And, sadly, no one ever asks if that black may have done something to merit being attacked.)

In his speech at the Democratic Convention, Jackson tried to reestablish his moral credentials:

If in my low moments, in word, deed, or attitude, through some error of temper, taste, or tone, I have 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.

From the thunderous applause and cheers that greeted these words, one would have thought that Jackson had apologized. But apologies do not begin with a qualifying "if." How could Jackson doubt that he had "caused discomfort, created pain," and "revived fears"? His "apology" had all the earmarks of sincerity without honesty (as someone once observed of James Agee).

Despite the almost universal approval given Jackson's speech, there is no indication that he appreciates the depth of his moral confusion about Judaism and anti-Semitism. In his June 1984 *Playboy* interview, Jackson said, "... from a religious standpoint, there is something about Judaism that appeals to me. I'm Judaeo-Christian; my religious roots are there." To a Jew, such a statement smacks of arrogance. Just because Jackson has read what Christians call the Old Testament does not mean he knows anything about Judaism. (But Christians often make the mistake of equating Judaism with their Old Testament.) It smacks of religious anti-Semitism by making Judaism a hyphenated prefix to Christianity. (There is no such religious identity as "Judaeo-Christian.") In that same interview, Jackson goes on to maintain that "historically, the

best experience of the Jewish people has been in their religious faith, the chastising, courageous strength of the prophets who challenged their own politicians." It is precisely this lecturing of other people about their experience that blacks have angrily objected to when they have been on the receiving end.

JACKSON'S POLITICAL ACUMEN could be considered as questionable as his morality. While political radicals and some liberals may have found solace in his positions on Central America, the defense budget, and gay rights, for example, his radicalism put him to the left of the black electorate and the Democratic party. This might be looked upon as commendable, except that Jackson was seeking, also, to become a power within the party at a time when it was adorning itself with the red, white, and blue. Jackson's trips to Nicaragua and Cuba and his statements of seeming approval of their governments did not endear him to the Democratic party leadership nor lead them to regard him as a political peer to be invited into the party's inner circle, which is what Jackson wanted.

The measure of politicians is, ultimately, their effectiveness in meeting the needs of a constituency. Jackson could never seem to decide whether his campaign was a serious political effort on behalf of blacks and the economically dispossessed, or whether it was only symbolic, an ego-assuaging moment in the sun (and the klieg lights). But blacks have had enough of symbolism, and the economic consequences of Reaganism required more than the psychological bromide of a well-dressed, good-looking black man on the campaign stump.

Jackson's lack of political acumen manifested itself also in his veiled threats to bolt the Democratic party and take his constituency with him. Throughout the campaign he contended that blacks could do without the Democratic party, but the Democrats could not do without blacks. This is only a half-truth, because blacks do not have an alternative to the Democratic party, except not voting. Jackson rattled sabres, but did not have a cavalry to make a charge.

It was precisely this lack of alternatives that underlined the political weakness of Jackson's candidacy. He wanted to become a power broker within the Democratic party, while at the same

time maintaining a stance of aggrieved outsider and titular head of black America. Spiderman could not have walked such a tightrope.

The only viable option Jackson had was the one he did not consider, and that was to combine his appeals to black pride and unity with an old-fashioned appeal for integration. Knowing that he had no chance of winning the nomination, Jackson could have selected a white woman for a running mate and campaigned throughout the primaries to bring blacks and liberal whites together as they have not been since 1964. Jackson was unable to do this because the "Rainbow Coalition," with its overtones of "black and white together," was a facade behind which Jackson sought to make himself president of only Black America.

He may succeed on the symbolic level but, in a curious way, his candidacy was out of step with both the black mood and the national mood. A *Newsweek* poll (May 7, 1984) found that 51 percent of registered black Democrats wanted Mondale as the party's nominee as opposed to 38 percent for Jackson. Even more interesting was that when asked who their second choice was 29 percent said Jackson, 28 percent Mondale, and 22 percent Hart. The same poll revealed that only 11 percent felt that Jackson represented blacks better than anybody else, and 82 percent saw him merely as one of a number of important black leaders.

The apparent "softness" of the black Jackson votes was underlined when a *New York Times/CBS News* poll (July 10, 1984) revealed little difference in black and white attitudes on defense spending, with 55 percent of blacks wanting military spending increased or kept the same. One of Jackson's big issues was significant reduction in defense spending. Another major Jackson issue was the abolition of runoff primaries in the South. Yet the same *Time/CBS News* poll revealed that only 15 percent of Jackson's avowed supporters agreed, and only 13 percent of black non-Jackson and non-Mondale supporters agreed.

Not only was Jackson not representative of blacks on two of his major issues, the thrust of his campaign was in defiance of what has been quietly happening for the past 15 years. He ignored the fact that blacks have been getting elected to major offices in cities where white support was necessary, and they have been doing so without the fairy-tale imagery of rainbows. Coleman Young in Detroit,

Wilson Goode in Philadelphia, Tom Bradley in Los Angeles, Harold Washington in Chicago, and Thurman Milner in Hartford could not have been elected with only black votes. And Bradley came within 1 percent of being elected governor of California, a feat clearly needing white votes.

Jackson's plaint throughout his campaign that whites were not as liberal as blacks, that blacks would vote for whites but not vice-versa, is simply not true. His comment was an insult to the black politicians who have presented themselves to the voters of their communities on their merit as politicians and administrators, and not as symbols for a cause.

The established black leadership recognized this clearly. Andrew Young commented that while there was "tremendous emotional and psychological significance to Jackson's candidacy, there hasn't been a great deal of political significance. . . . To be a real national leader, Jesse's got to find a way to lead white folks." NAACP head Benjamin Hooks observed that it was a "slur on the whole black community" to imply that blacks have not shown enthusiasm for voting before Jackson's candidacy:

We utilize the vote as a precious instrument and all this talk as if this is the first time it's happened is so absurd you can hardly deal with it. . . . but for the black vote, [New York Mayor] Koch would have been elected governor. Harold Washington, Congressman Harold Ford of Memphis, Wilson Goode—they've gotten larger black percentages than Jesse's candidacy.

And John Jacob of the Urban League was forthright: "There are black people with better credentials for the job of president." (Quotes from *Newsweek*, May 7, 1984.)

Jackson's attempt to meld a moral appeal with politics failed, and it was, perhaps, doomed to do so. The civil rights movement did for a time successfully fuse morality and politics, but now the hard question is: are the days over when blacks can make moral claims on the white conscience? The evidence would suggest that such claims have not only lost their effectiveness, they have acquired an air of black self-pity.

Jackson failed to recognize that the 1980s are a time when appeals to conscience are unnecessary and self-defeating. For the first time since the

Depression, more and more blacks and whites are riding in the same boat of economic despair and anxiety about the future. If Mondale and Hart made the mistake of appealing primarily to the white middle class, Jackson's mistake was ignoring that same middle class.

Jackson is a product of the '60s, and the style of his candidacy was covered with the dust of civil rights marches on southern back roads. However, the substance that made the civil rights movement successful was lacking—a wedding of tactics to meet the problem, an involvement of blacks and whites in an action to create change, an idealism that sought, not utopia, but respect for the integrity of all human beings. The civil rights movement awakened hope and gave it purpose and focus, and Americans, black and white, were freed from one cell, at least, in the prison of racism.

With one hand Jackson seemed to offer a renewal of the black-Jewish-liberal coalition of the civil rights movement through his Rainbow Coalition. With the other he seemed concerned only with creating a black constituency. While in the '60s there were problems faced only by blacks, there are now few if any *exclusively* black problems to be addressed by special programs or legislation. There is something dubious about Jackson pressuring Mondale to commit himself to a jobs program for blacks when white Americans also face an economically uncertain future. Ultimately, there is something immoral about a campaign slogan that says, "Our time has come!" because an "our" automatically creates a "their" whose time must end. One unhappy result might have been for the ordinary white American to assume that he or she was the "their" and to buy a Reagan button. For blacks, "Our time has come" was a cruel raising of hopes to a people for whom hope is the last lifeline.

THERE IS PERHAPS nothing in nature more ephemeral than a rainbow; however, its very appeal comes from its evanescent and almost illusory nature. Our love of rainbows comes not only from their illusion of substance but from how rarely they are seen, not to mention how quickly they pass.

It is doubtful, however, that Jesse Jackson's political career will be as short-lived as a rainbow. Nor will it fill our spirits with a sense of wonder and awe, causing us to feel, if only for an instant, that we can be more than we are. □