

Jesse Jackson

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Equality and justice

Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson was at the forefront of social justice and equality causes in the U.S. for more than three decades. His life was an indefatigable search for empowerment of the second-class citizen. He strove to change the internal and external policies of the world's most powerful country. His national and international reputation as a champion of the downtrodden and suppressed was second to none among African Americans by the late Twentieth Century.

Jackson was born in Greenville, South Carolina, into a socio-economic cauldron that definitively shaped his life's calling. He was the product of a teenage pregnancy, an illegitimate child whose biological father refused to acknowledge paternity. His mother was a poor maid and beautician who struggled to make ends meet. Years later, Jackson would proudly proclaim, 'Though I was born in a slum, the slum wasn't born in me.' Jackson's tireless efforts to promote self-esteem among America's underdogs came from the inner need to come to terms with his own origins.

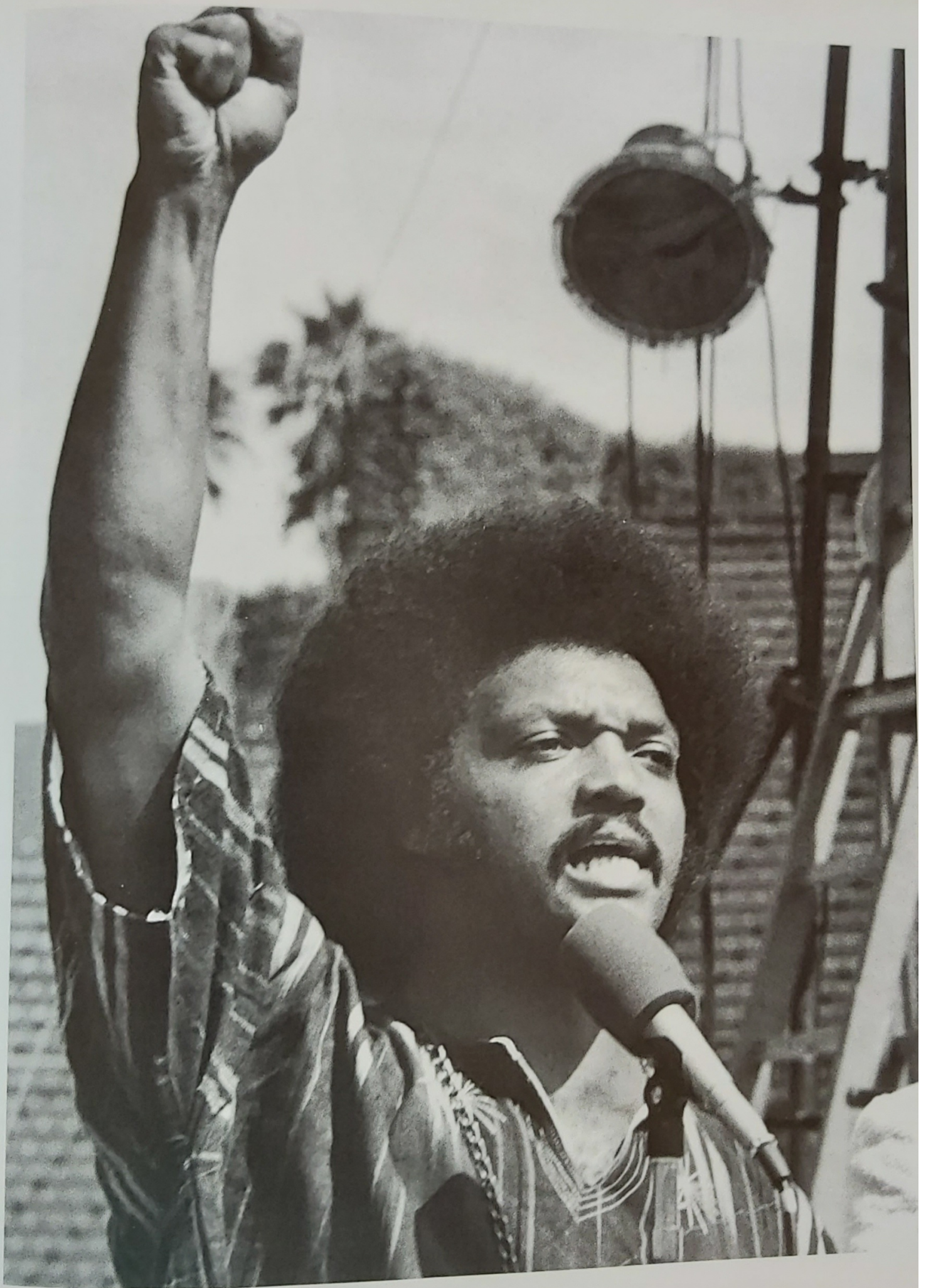
Brought up in the stifling environment of racial segregation, Jackson was a star football player in his all-black high school and President of the local Future Teachers of America. Jackson's early sensitivity to racial insults about

black students' academic backwardness led to future commitments to educational improvement of minorities. His leadership abilities blossomed in college, when he joined the 'Sit-in' movements protesting racial discrimination in restaurants, libraries and public spaces.

Awarded a degree in sociology in 1963, Jackson worked for the Young Democrats Convention and the Democratic governor of his state. A deeply religious man, he joined the Chicago Theological Seminary. Motivated to bolster Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s voting rights march in Alabama, he left the Seminary in 1965 and took to a career in politics from which there was no looking back.

Jackson was at the centre of the major civil rights organisations of the 1960s, collaborating closely with Dr. King. In 1966, the latter appointed him Executive Director of Operation Breadbasket, a programme to find employment for blacks in firms having heavy minority patronage. Dr. King was concerned about Jackson's need for the lime-light, but was impressed with his mobilisation skills.

Jackson's enigmatic personality contained the incompatible mix of altruism and one-upmanship. A rising star in black America's firmament, he set sights on inheriting his mentor's mantle after Dr. King's assassination in 1968. His clever usage of the media to anoint himself as



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Dr. King's rightful heir created the impression of an ego-centric and dangerously selfish person. Jackson's ambitious self-aggrandising behaviour earned him many enemies within Dr. King's circle and ultimately led to his ouster from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In 1971, with fanfare and celebrity attendance, Jackson formed his own national organisation— PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity). PUSH's projects of job training, voter registration, business enterprise development etc. for minorities brought Jackson to national attention. He visited scores of schools across America to inspire young blacks to reject drugs, switch off television and study doggedly. Gifted with the gab and a preaching style of stirring oratory, Jackson instilled in young blacks a sense of dignity that they would never forsake. His famous school chant emancipated thousands: 'I am somebody. I may be poor, but I am somebody. Respect me. My mind is a pearl. I can learn anything. I am somebody.'

Jackson emerged as the most persuasive black leader and was respected as a legitimate voice on minority issues by the press and in government. Influenced by the anti-war wave after Vietnam, he gained a worldwide reputation for humanist and anti-militarist standpoints. He was a brilliant negotiator and diplomat who went on several foreign jaunts to break deadlocks and mediate conflicts. A powerful behind-the-scenes presence in international politics, he helped release an American pilot from Syrian custody in 1983; obtained the freedom of fourty eight Cuban-American prisoners and persuaded Fidel Castro to attend church in 1984; promulgated peace plans for South Africa, Central America and the Middle East; freed 500 hostages held by Saddam Hussein in Kuwait in 1991, and repeated the feat in Bosnia (1999) and Sierra Leone (2000).

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In 1984 and 1988, Jackson unsuccessfully ran for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Presidency, fulfilling the aspiration of Dr. King and breaking the psychological barrier that occluded blacks from seeking high office. His 'Rainbow Coalition' ticket in 1988 brought together workers, farmers, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, Christians, Native Americans, homosexuals and white liberals, an unprecedented challenge to 'Reaganomic' hegemony. 'My constituency', he thundered, 'Is the desperate, the damned, the disinherited, the disrespected, and the despised.' Jackson's strategy was to unify the wretched of the earth and usher in an order based on justice and moral values. 'The Search for Common Ground', a book written by a black theologian, guided him on this voyage.

Jackson was adept at orchestrating media events and garnering publicity for his cause and for himself. He delivered some of the most spellbinding ad-lib speeches in American history. His instinct for the right phrase, the repartee that makes headlines and the crowd-pleasing dramatic gesture marked a real professional in public relations. His call to 'Choose the human race over the nuclear race' and his metaphor of America as a 'Multicultural quilt' turned into household sound-bites.

Like Dr. King, Jackson identified unequal economic relationships as the underlying cause of racial discrimination. In 2000, he authored 'It's About the Money', a book of financial advice for African Americans. He canvassed for increasing black power on Wall Street and forced major multinational corporations to defenestrate racial biases.

The most powerful African American leader since the 1970s, Jackson was mired in controversies. His imperious mannerisms provoked accusations of megalomania and narcissism from detractors. However, none could gainsay his vision of an alternative America that 'Ought to be.'

