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A jubilant Lt. Robert Goodman in Syria, with Jesse Jackson and U.S. Ambassador Robert Paganelli.

# The Challenge of A Black Presidential Candidacy

*The fundamental relationship between Blacks and the Democratic Party must be renegotiated. No longer can Blacks allow Democrats to take them and their votes for granted.*

Jesse L. Jackson,  
*The Washington Post*,  
April 10, 1983.



By Robert C. Smith  
and Joseph P. McCormick, II

**F**ive days after Christmas, the Rev. Jesse Jackson was pictured on the front page of *The Washington Post* with Syrian Ambassador to the United States, Rafic Jouejati. The occasion was Jackson's departure for Syria to seek the release of Navy Lt. Robert O. Goodman, who was captured after his fighter plane was shot down on December 4, 1983.

Amid reports from Syrian officials that Donald Rumsfeld, President Reagan's special Middle East envoy, had not discussed Goodman's fate during high-level talks in Syria, Jackson approached the Syrian government with a request to visit Damascus and discuss Goodman's physical condition and possible release.<sup>1</sup>

The following week, the government of Syria released Lt. Goodman. Jesse Jackson, a private citizen, albeit a candidate for the presidency, had succeeded in pulling off the biggest foreign policy coup by any non-incumbent in recent campaign history.

This event did a number of things. First, and perhaps foremost, it gave Jackson a great deal of sustained (free) media exposure. Given his comparatively late start in the race for the nomination, and the considerable financial distance between him and the Democratic front-runners, this was no small feat.

Second, it provided Jackson with the opportunity to lay claim that he is an effective leader, thereby reinforcing his criticism of the political leadership of both the Democratic and Republican Parties.

Finally, the Syria-Goodman episode has placed Jackson in a very strong position to mold public opinion on the issues and to challenge the American party system in order that Blacks may have a more

direct role in shaping the national government's approach to dealing with important domestic and foreign policy issues.

The significance, then, of Jackson's Syrian mission is that he has achieved for himself a national pulpit rarely enjoyed by Blacks in American politics. The question is: What is the message he intends to deliver to his new congregation, the American electorate?

### The Strategic Debate Over A Black Presidential Candidacy

The strategic implications of a Black presidential candidacy in 1984 have been analyzed in scores of newspaper articles and columns, and in a series of papers by academicians and professional campaign strategists. Analysts have given consideration to the number of delegates a Black candidate is likely to win; to questions of campaign organization and financing; to the question of which Democratic candidate is likely to be helped or hurt by the insurgency, and to whether Ronald Reagan's re-election prospects are enhanced.

Attention has also been given to the impact of the candidacy on the Black leadership group's cohesiveness and efficacy; to the impact of the candidacy on Black voter turn-out and the election of Blacks to other offices; to the question of whether the candidacy will intensify racial polarization in the electorate; to the question of whether the candidacy will contribute to the Democratic Party's supposed image as a captive of "special interests," and to questions of Jackson's character and competency.<sup>2</sup>

These analyses, while useful, are inherently problematic, given the dynamics of the politics of presidential choice in the United States. The art of political forecasting by journalists and academics is simply too crude to provide anything

other than speculative answers to most of the questions posed.

Ample evidence of the problematic character of such pre-election analyses is available to anyone who wishes to examine the writing of journalistic and academic pundits a year prior to the elections of 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980.<sup>3</sup> Such analyses are useful for purposes of discussion and debate but should not be taken as either a diagnosis of the situation or as a guide to action because, given the volatility of recent presidential elections, one simply cannot predict the impact of the Jackson candidacy on the outcome of the 1984 election. This is especially the case given the insurgency or "movement" character of the Jackson campaign.

In addition, such analyses typically overlook a fundamental purpose of a presidential campaign. In his elegant treatise, *The American Presidency* (1976), Grant McConnell writes:

*The President performs one of his most important services before he ever reaches office. This service consists very simply of campaigning. He shares this service with his opponent and, indeed, with all would-be candidates who have been eliminated in the long tortuous process of national choice, for the process of selecting a president is sometimes as important a feature of the office as the emergence of a particular individual as president. The contest—and all the conferring, caucusing, bargaining, and scheming—is the indispensable means by which each four years the record of the past is reviewed and a new assessment of the state of the nation is made by the people. Here is the way in which old compromises are examined, and perhaps revised, and new ones made among the many elements of the population. It is the occasion upon which every citizen is called on to think of him or herself as an American.*

If one accepts McConnell's proposition that the "process of electing a president is



40 sometimes as important a feature of the office as the emergence of a particular individual as president," then it seems appropriate to analyze the Jackson insurgency not in terms of "strategy" and "tactics" as these are conventionally understood, but rather one should examine it systemically, i.e., in terms of its impact on the American party system and the future direction of public policy.

This is the purpose of this analysis. Specifically, we examine Jackson's candidacy in terms of its potential to (1) contribute to the development of an authentic liberal-progressive agenda and constituency and (2) its potential to contribute to Black political empowerment, independence, and leverage in American electoral politics.

Our assessment of the success of his campaign is based not on the number of delegates obtained, nor on whether the Democratic front-runners or Reagan are helped or hurt, but instead on the nature of Jackson's definition of the Black predicament and the consequent ideology and policies he argues are necessary to address that predicament.

Also, this assessment is based on the extent to which Jackson is willing to challenge the Democratic Party in order to build an independent base of Black power in the party system. In our view, these are the fundamental challenges of *and* to Jackson. The success or failure of his campaign, in the final analysis will be determined on the basis of how he and the party system meet these challenges.

### The Challenge of Ideology

The Democratic Party is under pressure to abandon its progressive heritage and the unfinished liberal agenda in order to realign itself with the alleged conservative mood of the electorate. The first challenge of the Jackson campaign, therefore, is to maintain the liberal hour in a time of conservative reaction.

Principal proponents of this strategy of abandoning the liberal agenda are Hamilton Jordan and Bert Lance, erstwhile protégés of President Jimmy Carter. In a series of speeches and conferences across the South, Lance and Jordan have argued that if the Democratic Party wishes to carry the South (by which they mean the white South), it has to move away from the traditional liberalism of the New Deal-Great Society eras toward a more conservative stance.

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## We may be faced in November, 1984, with a choice not unlike that seen in 1980.

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In a recent issue of the *New Republic*, Jordan raised the "special interest" canard by arguing that the Democratic Party is too liberal in part because it is the captive of "special interests" (Blacks, feminists, educators and labor) and that the Democratic nominee and platform should take a public stand in opposition to one or more of these groups.<sup>4</sup> This "southern strategy" may appeal to the interests and prejudices of southern whites but, for Blacks, it is a prescription for the "benign neglect" of the deepening crisis of the underclass.

Clearly, the foremost challenge of the Jackson candidacy is to articulate a "Black" strategy to counteract the emerging southern strategy of right wing white southern Democrats. Such a strategy is seen as imperative for several reasons.

First, the fundamental economic and social problems confronting Blacks require at a minimum the enactment of the unfinished liberal agenda and may, in fact, require the development of an explicit social democratic agenda along the lines of

the advanced democracies of Western Europe.

Second, the probability of Blacks supporting a liberal-leftward strategy is rather high. For example, recent data indicate 85% of Black Americans respond to domestic and foreign issues in a liberal-leftward way (see Norman Nie, S. Verba and J. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter*, Cambridge, 1976, pp. 253-55).

Finally, this strategy is imperative because Blacks are as important a part of the Democratic Party coalition as white southerners, contributing approximately 20% of the party's vote in recent national elections.<sup>5</sup>

These imperatives dictate a liberal-progressive agenda for any candidate who would seek to represent the Black community in presidential politics.

This paper is not intended to develop in detail the unfinished agenda of American liberalism but, at a minimum, such an agenda should include the following:

- A reconstruction of the economic system so that it provides maximum feasible employment for all citizens willing and able to work, at wages adequate to sustain self and family.

- Reform of the welfare system so that it is genuinely work-related, i.e., it operates to provide adequate income to those who cannot find work, to supplement the income of those who work but at inadequate wages (the working poor) and to provide decent support for those who for reasons of age or physical or mental handicap cannot work.

- A comprehensive national health insurance system with rigorous cost incentives and controls on the health service industry.

- Reform of the educational system to assure the widest availability of child-care



and higher educational opportunities to all citizens.

■ Reform of the military budget to limit expenditures to strictly defined purposes of defense rather than war.

■ A comprehensive, federally-directed program to begin the re-industrialization of the nation and the rebuilding of its infrastructure with maximum feasible participation of local citizens in planning and implementation.

■ A renewed commitment to the principle of affirmative action as requisite to social justice and equity.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Imperative of Full Employment

The central item on this agenda is the development of a comprehensive set of policies designed to achieve full employment in a relatively short period of time. Unemployment has been a longstanding problem in the Black community. Only three times between 1949 and 1974 did the official Black unemployment fall below 6% while for whites during the same period only twice did it rise above 6%. This long term and persistent high unemployment is the major causal factor in the development of the Black underclass and the "tangle of pathologies" (female-headed households, crime, drug addiction, welfare dependency, alcoholism, etc.) that characterize this part of the Black community.<sup>7</sup>

The national Black leadership has long recognized the centrality of unemployment in the Black predicament in the United States. It is sometimes overlooked that the 1963 March on Washington was a march for "Jobs and Freedom." It is also often forgotten that when Martin Luther King was murdered he was preparing to lead a 'Poor Peoples' march in Washington whose central demand was full employment.

Also, at a 1973 conference of scholars called by the National Urban League to

consider post-civil rights issues, Professor Charles Hamilton presented a paper arguing that there should be a combined effort by civil rights and labor groups to initiate the vigorous push for a full employment bill. Finally, the centerpiece of the Congressional Black Caucus' first Legislative Agenda was "The Equal Opportunity and Full Employment" bill.

### Jesse Jackson's candidacy is of great symbolic significance. It represents another step in the historic struggle by Blacks for equality of access and opportunity in the political process.

This bill, as originally introduced by the late Senator Hubert Humphrey and caucus member Augustus Hawkins, proposed that the United States establish for each of its citizens a legal entitlement to a job enforceable through the courts; require the federal government to serve as employer of last resort and reduce unemployment to three percent within 18 months after passage. A revised version signed by President Carter deleted all of these provisions and substituted a vague promise to reduce unemployment to four percent within five years of enactment. These radical revisions of the bill were in part extracted by Carter in negotiations with the Congressional Black Caucus in exchange for his support.

Inadequate though the final act is, it does, as Congressman John Conyers (*In These Times*, November, 1978, p. 16) argues, provide "a framework for full employment planning." Among the elements

of a program that could be implemented under the act Congressman Conyers proposes are: a massive targeted job training and employment program focusing on the revitalization of cities; a community-worker ownership program for abandoned industries; work sharing; and an anti-inflation program that deals with administered pricing, excessive military spending, and some form of wage and price controls.<sup>8</sup>

A serious and potentially effective national full employment policy would entail integrating Conyer's proposals into a comprehensive program to achieve price stabilization and economic revitalization. This progressive program requires a party and candidates willing to commit themselves to a long term effort to reinvigorate the liberal agenda through well-reasoned and symbolically attractive political campaigns capable of unifying the nation's disparate constituencies.

The first challenge of the Jackson campaign, then, is to contribute to the development of this as the new path for the Democratic Party in the last quarter of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup>

#### The Challenge of Political Independence

The second challenge to Jesse Jackson and the Democratic Party is in many ways more difficult than the first. This challenge requires that Jackson be willing and able to carry his insurgency into the general election as an independent candidate if the Democratic Party yields to the pressures of its right wing and repudiates its progressive heritage and the liberal agenda.

The latter challenge is more difficult than the former because it would almost certainly lead to the re-election of Ronald Reagan, which would be contrary to the main 1984 objectives of many Black leaders.



42 Yet even if Reagan were re-elected, it is conceivable Congress would at a minimum reject further tax cuts, reductions in social expenditures or further increases in military outlays. Thus, assuming war is avoided, the worst of the "Reagan Revolution" — from a Black standpoint — would be over in 1985, except for his continued attacks on the symbolic structure of Black rights and affirmative action.<sup>10</sup>

It should be emphasized, however, that an independent challenge by Jackson should be undertaken only if the Democratic nominee and the party's platform reject a liberal and progressive agenda. In this eventuality, a democratic president — if elected in 1984 — is not likely to propose policies that fundamentally and specifically address Black needs and concerns; rather he is more likely to be a Carter "clone" of Reagan, to use Senator Edward Kennedy's phrase. As Congressman John Conyers has written (*The Progressive*, November, 1983, p. 11):

*Cutbacks in the Government's redistributive programs and the military buildup did not begin with the Reagan Administration. The retreat from full employment as the guiding principle of economic policy took place under Jimmy Carter. And despite their Congressional victories in November 1982, Democrats failed to seize the initiative and reverse the course of Reaganomics. Instead, Democratic Congressional leaders collaborated in a muddle of bipartisanship that only reinforced conservative demands.*

*The collapse of liberal Democratic politics has left a gaping hole in both leadership and policy. After years of turning away from a commitment to equity, evading controversial stands on urgent issues, and failing to advance farsighted programs, Democrats have become remote from the discontents as well as the dreams of ordinary citizens.*<sup>11</sup>

Thus we may be faced in November,

1984, with a choice not unlike that seen in 1980. In that event, many Blacks and progressives probably would stay at home or vote for John Anderson [based on the assumption that he may run again] thereby re-electing Ronald Reagan anyway.<sup>12</sup>

If one believes there are other objectives in the politics of presidential choice this year, then a case can be made for the feasibility of Jesse Jackson running as an independent.

The Jackson insurgency should have an importance that transcends the election of 1984. It can and should be used as part of a movement to establish an independent base of Black political power in the electoral process.<sup>13</sup> While there are risks in this approach, we believe the potential long-term gains outweigh the potential short-term losses.

In addition to offering an alternative to the conservatism of the two-party system, an independent candidacy would make unmistakably clear to the powers-that-be in the Democratic Party that the Black vote can no longer be taken for granted. A constant refrain of Democratic Party strategists (especially in private discussions) is that Black issues tend to be expensive and divisive and, therefore, should be ignored because in the general election the Black vote has no place to go but Democratic.

These strategists assume that the Black vote is safe, therefore, the party should adopt candidates and a platform designed to appeal to more problematic constituency groups, i.e., urban ethnics or white southerners. A Jackson challenge in the 1984 general election would fundamentally alter this strategic calculation.

Finally, assuming that Jackson wins at least five percent of the national vote and at least one-third of the Black vote, his candidacy would lay the organizational and financial base for the future construc-

tion of an on-going independent Black political base in national politics, and contribute an important element to the building of an alternative progressive coalition within or outside the two-party system.

### Conclusion

Choosing the president is arguably the most important act of American citizenship. Jesse Jackson's candidacy is thus of great symbolic significance, representing yet another step in the historic struggle by Blacks for equality of access and opportunity in the political process. Symbolism is not unimportant in politics. However, we believe if this candidacy is to represent more than a symbolic act, Jackson and the Democratic Party must forthrightly address the challenges posed by the Black predicament.<sup>15</sup>

It is not possible to predict at the outset of the campaign what its outcome will be. Nor, however, was it possible at the outset to predict the outcome of the great civil rights campaigns at Birmingham and Selma. What is possible to predict is that if Jesse Jackson ignores the challenges posed herein, his campaign will not, as Professor Mack Jones of Atlanta University puts it, "represent a qualitative change in the nature of Black political participation but rather more of the same."<sup>16</sup> And more of the same represents a betrayal of the legitimate interests and aspirations of Black people in the United States. □

*The authors are members of the political science faculty at Howard University. This article is a revised version of a paper prepared for a forum on Blacks and Presidential Politics, sponsored by the Black Politics Field Committee of the Department of Political Science, and the National Conference of Black Political Scientists. The forum was held at Howard last November 17.*



## REFERENCE

<sup>1</sup>For background discussion and news analysis of the Syria-Goodman episode, see Milton Coleman and Martin Schram, "Release Boosts Jackson Candidacy, Could Set Mondale Back," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1983, p. A4.

<sup>2</sup>See the papers in the symposia on "Should a Black Run for President" by Professors Marguerite Barnett, Lucius Baker, Mack Jones, Ronald Walters and Paula McClain in *PS* (Summer 1983), the quarterly journal of the American Political Science Association. Also, see James Lingle, "To Run or Not to Run: Estimates of A Black Contender's Strength at the 1984 Convention" (Paper prepared for the Joint Center for Political Studies, Washington, 1983); "Outlook for A Black Presidential Candidacy" (A Background paper prepared by the Joint Center for Political Studies, Washington, 1983); and Ricky Hill, "The Crisis of A Black Presidential Candidate," Manuscript, Department of Political Science, South Carolina State, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>Probably the most convenient source to consult this evidence is the series on *The Making of The President* by Theodore White.

<sup>4</sup>See Hamilton Jordan's "Can the Whole Be More than the Sum of its Part: Mondale's Choice," *New Republic*, June 6, 1983, pp. 15-19.

<sup>5</sup>See Robert Axelrod's, "Where the Votes Come From: An Analysis of Electoral Coalitions, 1952-68," *American Political Science Review* 66 (March 1972) pp. 11-20, and "Communications," *American Political Science Review* 72 (June 1982) pp. 393-96.

<sup>6</sup>We have limited our attention to items on the domestic liberal agenda, however, there is one foreign policy issue of transcendental importance to the Black community—the liberation of Southern Africa. Jesse Jackson should use every forum in the campaign to bring to the attention of the American people the nature of the day-to-day holocaust in South Africa and should seek pledges from his rivals to insert in the platform commitments to impose immediate diplomatic, economic and military sanctions on the racist regime in Pretoria until it grants the African people their citizenship rights.

<sup>7</sup>The research of Professor M. Harvey Brenner of Johns Hopkins University shows that for every 1% increase in the unemployment rate there is associated a 5.7% increase in murders, a 4.1% rise in suicides, a 1.9% rise in overall mortality and a 3.3% rise in the number of people admitted to mental institutions. If one calculates the consequences of two generations of 10% plus unemployment then one has a necessary and sufficient explanation for the terrible conditions of the Black underclass.

<sup>8</sup>Congressman Conyers' legislation, like most of the initiatives of the Congressional Black Caucus on

the employment crisis in the Black community, has not been given serious consideration in the Congress. This makes even more imperative the challenge to Jackson of making the employment crisis in the Black community the centerpiece of the domestic agenda of his campaign. This would help contribute to the requisite public pressure necessary to get the Democratic Party and the Congress to support Conyers' legislation and similar proposals of other members of Congress that deal with the deepening economic crisis in Black America.

<sup>9</sup>This is not to say that it may not be necessary for liberals and the left in the United States to move toward the development and articulation of an explicit social democratic agenda (in the form of systematic national planning, nationalization of some industries — especially energy and armaments; a permanent system of restraint on monopoly sector wages and prices, credit allocation and a more progressive and effectively administered inheritance tax) but rather it is to argue that the task for Jackson is more modest — the maintenance of the liberal hour in a time of conservative reaction.

<sup>10</sup>Opponents of an independent Black presidential strategy also argue that it would alienate Blacks from the Democratic Party establishment; that it would further and more severely divide and factionalize Black leadership; that Reagan's reelection would deprive the Black community of patronage and infrastructure support (physical and social) that would flow from even a conservative Democratic administration; that it might permit Ronald Reagan to "pack" the Supreme Court with a reactionary majority; and that the strategy might fail in that Black voters might overwhelmingly reject Jackson's independent candidacy in favor of the Democratic nominee, thereby rendering independent Black presidential politics impotent. Except for the potential problem with the Supreme Court, we believe these are short-term losses that are outweighed by the potential long-term gains.

<sup>11</sup>For further discussion of the Congressional Democrats' capitulation to the right during Reagan's first year, see Steven S. Smith's "Budget Battles in 1981: The Role of the Majority Party Leadership" in Allen P. Sindler, ed., *American Politics and Public Policy: Seven Case Studies* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1982) pp. 43-78, and Lance T. LeLoupe's, "After the Blitz: Reagan and the U.S. Congressional Budget Process," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 7 (August 1982), pp. 321-39.

<sup>12</sup>This analysis assumes that Congressman John Anderson will also again run as an independent in 1984. We do not believe, however, that he will be able to attract significant Black support, although there may emerge an opportunity for coalition building between the two campaigns.

<sup>13</sup>Professor Ronald Walters of Howard University has written and lectured extensively during the last decade on the need to develop an independent Black political formation in American politics. See the following: "Strategy for 1976: A Black Political Party," *Black Scholar* 7 (October 1975) pp. 8-20; "Black Presidential Politics in 1980: Bargaining or Begging," *Black Scholar* 11 (March-April 1980) pp. 22-31; "Black Presidential Politics in 1980: Winning Strategies or Symbolism," manuscript, Department of Political Science, Howard University, 1980 and "A Black Presidential Strategy for the 1984 Elections," manuscript, Department of Political Science, Howard University, 1983.

<sup>14</sup>Professor Walters writes, "The major candidates and the party apparatus have believed that the Black vote is a *captured* vote, unable to mount credible strategies of leverage, so the tendency increasingly has been to ignore both the importance of the vote and the policy interests it represents. Therefore, in an effort to maintain the credibility (or believability) of the threat of Blacks to retaliate if there is no bargaining, the option has to remain open for Blacks to threaten the Democratic Party with defeat even in the general election by supporting either a Black candidate or by supporting a third party candidate such as John Anderson. This would be the strategy if Blacks were dissatisfied with the results of the bargaining with the Democratic nominee." See "A Black Presidential Strategy for the 1984 Elections," p. 10.

<sup>15</sup>In this regard, Jackson's challenge of the Democratic Party delegate selection rules is a cause of concern because, the merits of the challenge notwithstanding, it runs the risk of deflecting media and public attention away from the substantive issues that should constitute the central focus of his campaign. And since even a change of the rules is not likely to alter the outcome of the nomination or substantially enhance the number of Jackson delegates at the convention, it probably is not worth a public challenge that would draw attention away from discussion of the Black predicament and the liberal, progressive agenda. For background and news analyses of the delegate selection rules, see Martin Schram's, "Jackson to Get DNC Hearing on Complaint" *Washington Post*, January 21, 1984, p. A1, and Christopher Edley, Jr.'s, "Jesse Jackson vs. the Party Rules," *Washington Post*, December 28, 1983, p. A19.

<sup>16</sup>Mack Jones, "A Black Presidential Candidate in 1984: More of the Same," *PS* 15 (Summer 1983) p. 496. □