





On the Passing of the Rev. Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr.

The UNC Center for Civil Rights honors the life of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., who has passed away at the age of 84. In his early years his civil rights activism catapulted Jackson into the proximity of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s inner circle; he was among a small group of civil rights leaders who were with King in Memphis when he was killed by an assassin's bullet. In the following years Jackson sought to assume the mantle of leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. Jackson worked in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Operation Breadbasket. After Dr. King's death, he continued to work for Operation Breadbasket, until his tensions with Ralph Abernathy, King's successor at S.C.L.C., led them to part ways, after which he founded Rainbow PUSH, a northern-based civil rights organization. In the 1980's he became one of the leading voices in opposition to the Reagan Administration's conservative opposition to the American civil rights agenda and to its support for South Africa's apartheid policies. He entered the political arena in 1984 and became the second African American, following Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm in 1972, to seek the nomination of the Democratic Party for President of the United States. His 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns transformed American politics.

In 1984, Jackson negotiated the release of an American Navy fighter pilot who was imprisoned in Lebanon after his plane was shot down. Jackson's reputation as a human rights activist with diplomatic skill was enhanced, as was his international standing.

His showing during the 1988 presidential campaign further cemented that standing, as did his powerful speech at the Democratic National Convention, in which he urged Americans to "keep hope alive". In 1990 Jackson was elected to serve as a largely honorary "statehood senator" for the District of Columbia. In 2000, President Bill Clinton presented Jesse Jackson with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, our nation's highest civilian honor.

Perhaps Jesse Jackson's most lasting national impact was the ripple effect of his two presidential campaigns - their echo. Jackson laid the groundwork for the 2008 and 2012 elections of Barack Obama as the first African American to serve as President of the United States. President Obama credited Jesse Jackson's two campaigns with changing what was possible in the United States.

As is true of all of us, Jesse Jackson, Sr. was not perfect. But he had a huge impact on bringing our nation closer to the mission stated in our Constitution's preamble – he helped to move us closer to becoming a "more perfect union". May he rest in peace and power.

