

BOOK BRIEF

The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics. By Adolph L. Reed, Jr. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1986 Pp. xii, 170. \$6.95 (paperback)

Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign is still resounding in the ears of the Black community. According to Adolph L. Reed, Jr. this echoing has sent waves of destruction and confusion throughout the nation's Black communities. Since this book was written in 1986, Reed did not have the benefit of Jackson's 1988 campaign results. Fortunately, as this book review is being written, the 1988 campaign has passed and we may analyze this book with both campaigns in mind.

The Black community, according to Reed, is divided into two "political" groups, the Protest Elite and the Electoral Political Elites, which are constantly fighting for the honor to represent Blacks in the American political arena. These groups claims to this proprietorship are supported by their respective belief that their ideologies are truly reflective of the needs of Blacks. Protest Elites existed prior to Blacks admittance into American politics and they still believe there is constructive, political power in organized protest. For example, they would point to the manner in which Blacks protested for the right to vote prior to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. According to Reed, the Protest Elites accepted the symbolism inherent in the Jackson campaign. In fact, Jackson was very much the prototype of the Protest Elites' notion of a Black politician, nevertheless they did not fully support him. The Protest Elites vocalize what they perceive to be the concerns of the Black community thorough unsophisticated methods. These methods include supporting emotional and inexperienced symbolic leaders, like Jackson, who did not reveal his campaign platform until late in the 1984 presidential race, nonetheless he toured many of the large cities campaigning for the Black vote.

In contrast, the Electoral Political Elites are mainly Black elected officials, who believe that all Blacks who enter into politics should fit within the existing hierarchy of Black politicians. This explains why many of the Electoral Political Elites refused to accept or support the Jackson campaign. Reed argues that the Electoral Political Elites are attempting to use the Democratic Party as a channel for Black views and concerns. This is why many Black leaders supported "liberal" white candidates like Walter Mondale in 1984 and Michael Dukakis in 1988, instead of Jackson.

Initially Reed presents the two main issues of the book. First, he attempts to look at Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign and the legitimacy of Jackson's six campaign claims. Secondly, he attempts to show that these claims are merely "emblematic."¹

According to Reed, Jackson's six claims were: "(1) that Jackson has a base among the "Black masses" who supported his efforts over elite opposition; (2) that he is a central figure in Black politics in the South; (3) that a

1. REED, JR., THE JESSE JACKSON PHENOMENON: CRISIS OF PURPOSE IN AFRO-AMERICAN POLITICS 1 (1986).

Jackson campaign was crucial for stimulating Black voter registration and turn out, especially in the South; (4) that Jackson's candidacy would generate significant coattail effects, assisting the election of Black candidates at state and local levels; (5) that Jackson's efforts would reinvigorate politics among Blacks and stimulate political discourse in the Black community and (6) that the campaign opened the possibility for a new, progressive alliance in the Democratic party, the "Rainbow Coalition."² It is in exploring these issues that Reed fails to see the psychological effects that Jackson's campaign had on the Black community. The author merely dispels these claims as embellished and, for the most part, fabricated.

Jackson's first claim is criticized by Reed, because there is no evidence that the campaign actually had a support base among the "Black masses." Reed seems to believe that in many instances where it appeared that Jackson was gaining support he was not. Rather, he argues that Jackson strategically planned his campaigning in certain states to coincide with local campaigns which had already garnered the support of local Blacks. So what appeared to be a mass of Black supporters for Jackson, was really support borrowed from other Blacks running for local office. In other words, the Jackson campaign latched onto the coattails of legitimate Black politicians who had worked their way up through the Black political hierarchy. Reed goes on to say this is part of the reason why Jackson was not supported by many Blacks, especially those who are associated with the Black Political Elites and their ideology.

What Reed fails to mention is that many Black candidates gained support by aligning themselves with the Jackson campaign. While Jackson was borrowing from their support bases, they were building these bases from their association with the Jackson campaign.

Reed further states that these seemingly popular local candidates were not elected by the Black masses; even in the states where the candidate may have been elected, Jackson did not win the primaries. Therefore Jackson's claim of support from the Black masses was inflated, if not completely untrue.

Reed fails to realize that Jackson's campaign was not a magical cure-all of the plight of Black people. It will take more than a Black presidential campaign to work the magic necessary to organize and inform people who have been unaware of the American political system's historic neglect of Black concerns. Many white incumbents won their elections because Black people voted for them and have always done so. However, Jackson's campaign did give Black people an opportunity to select a Black candidate, which has not existed in some areas since the late 1960's or early 1970's.³

Reed also contests whether Jackson is a central figure in Southern Black politics. He claims that Jackson was heavily discouraged by officials in his home state as well as campaign supporters when he expressed an interest in running for South Carolina's United States Senate seat. Also, in 1980 when Jackson went to Miami to mediate a civil disturbance, Andrew Young and he were denounced as uninvited, impertinent outsiders by that city's Black community.

South Carolina is but one state in the South. Reed acknowledges that it

2. *Id.* at 10-11.

3. Jackson was the first Black to run in the presidential primary of the major political parties. However, Blacks have run for president as minor party candidates.

has been years since Jackson has lived there. It was not the least bit surprising for South Carolinians to expect Jackson to run for the Illinois United States Senate seat since he lives in Chicago. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for public officials to dissuade others, especially Blacks, from running for office. Also, being an unwelcome guest in Miami does not prove that Jackson did not have a grip on Southern Black politics, but only that Blacks in Miami felt that they should handle their own disputes.

As for stimulating Black voter registration and turn out, Reed says these increases usually occurred when other popular Blacks were running for office. Again, the Jackson campaign was not the spark but instead borrowed a flame from another's torch. As far as the campaign providing an avenue for other Black politicians to be elected, Reed says that this has not been statistically proven. Also he notes that many Blacks are still losing elections to white politicians, even in areas densely populated by Blacks.

But the Joint Center for Political Studies has recently announced that "the total number of black elected officials increased by 2.2 percent last year [1987], from 6,681 to 6,829."⁴ Included in this increase are 54 positions that had never been filled by Blacks before. Conceivably, the Jackson campaigns were instrumental in increasing these statistics.

It cannot be disputed that Black voter registration increased during Jackson's campaign. It is impossible to point to a direct cause of what generated the voter registration increase. However, if more Blacks were registering to vote for Jackson as well as local Black candidates, Jackson and his campaign workers can take pride in effectuating that accomplishment.

Reed's most valid critique of Jackson's claims is that the Jackson campaign would reinvigorate politics among Afro-Americans and stimulate political discourse in the Black community. It cannot be debated that in 1984 Jackson did not state his campaign's platform until the eve of the Democratic convention. Reed sees this as Jackson asserting a right to be supported by Blacks simply because he is Black, regardless of the issues his campaign was addressing. This projection of "I should be elected because I am Jesse Jackson" was rejected by many Blacks as just symbolic rhetoric. Many times Jackson used images of being divinely chosen. Again, a "right" to be elected surfaces, not because of valid issues that were part of the platform but because Jackson was ordained. Not only did he not have a strong platform, but he used images of the late Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. and his own involvement in the civil rights movement to generate credibility. In Reed's opinion, Jackson's campaign left the Black community in despair and hopelessness, when it should have brought focus to political issues that are affecting the community. Reed feels that Jackson became an oratorical symbol for Black people, and that Jackson failed in his half-hearted effort to reinvigorate politics in the Black community.

It is misleading to say that political discourse was not generated in the Black community. Black organizations such as college fraternities and sororities and others put out full scale efforts in order to increase political awareness and register voters. College students were involved in holding community debates on the legitimacy of the Jackson campaign. Though Reed has a valid

4. JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL STUDIES, TREND LETTER: BLACK ELECTED OFFICIALS IN THE UNITED STATES, JANUARY 1988 (Sept. 1988).

point that the claimed increase in voter registration was somewhat embellished, political discourse was generated, nonetheless.

Reed also addresses the issue of a progressive alliance in the Democratic Party. Reed seems to believe that if Jackson had taken some relevant issues, vocalized them as his campaign's platform, and generated Black support on them, then Jackson could have backed the Democratic Party against a wall and forced them to seriously consider Black concerns. Presently, the Black vote is taken for granted in the Democratic Party namely because for so long Blacks have voted for Democrats for a lack of a better alternative. Therefore it was not totally illogical that Jackson demanded the Black vote because he felt that he was the best available alternative for Blacks.

As mentioned above, Reed fails to address the psychological impact of Jackson's 1984 campaign. We can look at the success of the 1988 campaign and see that many of these claims did in fact manifest themselves. It cannot be argued that more Blacks are running as well as being elected in local campaigns, nor that Jackson was supported by the Black masses, especially in Washington D.C. Jackson has become a central figure in politics especially in the Black political arena, and more Blacks have registered to vote than ever before. In hindsight, one can see that Jackson's 1984 campaign claims were very realistic.

Though this book does mention the 1984 campaign, it really is not a book about the Jesse Jackson phenomenon. Rather, it appears to be an intellectual thesis on two political groups and their significance in Black politics. In that sense, the book is not true to its title. It is difficult to see what type of impact this work has had on society's interpretation of the 1984 campaign because we are in the wake of the 1988 campaign.

The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon does generate thought about Blacks and the American political system. It forces one to go beyond the surface of the 1984 campaign and investigate the dynamic activities that were going on behind the scenes. Jackson was a symbolic candidate as evidenced by his failure to announce a platform until very late in the campaign. But Blacks voters did seriously consider his candidacy. However, is it fair to assume that Black voters are so ignorant and uninformed that they could not decide on the platform that Jackson would address? Other presidential candidates do not select their own platforms, their constituencies do. Why then did the Black masses who supported Jackson not create his election platform? These are valid questions that Reed could have addressed in his book.

Reed's writing style is confusing, and it is difficult to discern his intended audience. The average reader in the United States would have been totally perplexed after the first chapter. If Reed had used a title that was more reflective of the book's true content, people who were interested in the two Black political groups would have had a great time reading this book. Those who are more interested in the Jackson campaign could have found a book more true to the topic. Even with his confusing writing style, Reed stated his agenda in the beginning and followed it through to the end.

I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the political development of Blacks. It is well written for a sophisticated reader and does address some valid concerns about the 1984 Jackson campaign. However, it is not a "Jesse Jackson" book. Many of the critiques have been dispelled by the

1988 campaign but *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon* does provoke some thought about the Black church, the Black masses in the South and two very politically opposed Black groups.

—KHADIJAH MUHAMMAD

