



Jesse Jackson's historic speech

The *Portland Observer* is reprinting the full text of Jackson's dynamic convention speech of July 17, 1984, as a service to our readers.

INTRODUCTION

Tonight we come together bound by our faith in a mighty God, with genuine respect and Love for our country, and inheriting the Legacy of a great Party—the Democratic Party—which is the best hope for re-directing our nation on a more humane, just and peaceful course. This is not a perfect party. We are not a perfect people. Yet, we are called to a perfect mission: to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked; to house the homeless; to teach the illiterate; to provide jobs for the jobless, and to choose the human race over the nuclear race. We are gathered here this week to nominate a candidate and write a platform which will expand, unify, direct and inspire our Party and the nation to fulfill this mission.

My constituency is the damned, disinherited, disrespectful, despised. They are restless and seek relief. They've voted in record numbers. They have invested faith, hope, trust in us. The Democratic Party must send them a *signal* that we care. I pledge my best to not let them down.

THE CALL OF CONSCIENCE: REDEMPTION, EXPANSION, HEALING AND UNITY

Leadership must heed the call of conscience: Redemption, expansion, healing and unity, for they are the key to achieving our mission. Time is neutral and does not change things. With courage and initiative leaders change things. No generation can choose the age or circumstances in which it is born, but through leadership, it can choose to make the age in which it is born an age of enlightenment—an age of jobs, peace and justice. Only leadership—that intangible combination of gifts, discipline, information, circumstance, courage, timing, will and divine inspiration—can lead us out of the crisis in which we find ourselves. Leadership can mitigate the misery of our nation. Leadership can part the waters and lead our nation in the direction of the Promised Land. Leadership can lift the boats stuck at the bottom.

I have had the rare opportunity to watch seven men, and then two, pour out their souls, offer their service and heed the call of duty to direct the course of our nation. There is a proper season for everything. There is a time to sow and a time to reap. There is a time to compete and a time to cooperate. I ask for your vote on the first ballot as a vote for a new direction for this party and this nation; a vote for conscience and conviction. But I will be proud to support the nominee of this convention for the President of the United States. I have watched the leadership of our party grow and develop. My respect for both Mr. Mondale and Mr. Hart is great. I have watched them struggle with the cross winds and cross fires of being visible public servants, and I believe that they will both continue to try to serve us faithfully. I am elated by the knowledge that for the first time in our history, a woman, Geraldine Ferraro, will be recommended to share our ticket.

Throughout this campaign, I have tried to offer leadership to the Democratic Party and the nation. If in my high moments, I have done some good, offered some service, shed some light, healed some wounds, rekindled some hope, stirred someone from apathy and indifference, or in any way helped someone along the way, then this campaign has not been in vain. For friends who loved and cared for me, for a God who spared me, and for a family who understood me, I am eternally grateful.

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

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occasions when my grape turned into a raisin and my joy bell lost its resonance, please forgive me. Charge it to my head, so limited in its finitude; not to my heart, which is boundless in its love for the entire human family. I am not a perfect servant. I am a public servant, doing my best as I develop and serve against the odds. Be patient. God is not finished with me yet.

This campaign has taught me much: that leaders must be tough enough to fight, tender enough to cry, human enough to make mistakes, humble enough to admit them, strong enough to absorb the pain, and resilient enough to bounce back. For leaders the pain is often intense. But you must smile through tears and keep moving with the faith that there is a brighter side somewhere.

I went to see Hubert Humphrey three days before he died. He had just called Richard Nixon from his dying bed, and many people wondered why. I asked him. He said, “Jesse, from this vantage point, with the sun setting in my life, all of the speeches, the political conventions, the crowds and the great fights are behind me now. At a time like this you are forced to deal with your irreducible essence, forced to grapple with that which is really important to you. And what I have concluded is this: when all is said and done, we must *for* give each other, *redeem* each other, and move on.”

Our party is emerging from one of its most hard fought battles for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in our history. But our healthy competition should make us better, not bitter. We must use the insight, wisdom and experience of the late Hubert Humphrey as a balm for the wounds in our Party, this nation and the world. We must forgive each other, redeem each other, regroup and move on.

Our flag is red, white and blue, but our nation is rainbow—red, yellow, brown, black and white—and all are precious in God's sight. America is not like a blanket—one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. It is more like a quilt—many patches, many pieces, many colors and many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread. The white, the Hispanic, the Black, the Arab, the Jew, the woman, the Native American, the small farmer, the businessperson, the environmentalist, the peace activist, the young, the old, the lesbian, the gay, and the disabled make up the American quilt. Even in our fractured state, all of us count and all of us fit somewhere. We have proven that we can SURVIVE without each other. But we have not proven that we can WIN or MAKE PROGRESS without each other.

From Fannie Lou Hamer in Atlantic City in 1964 to the Rainbow Coalition in San Francisco today; from the Atlantic to the Pacific, we have experienced pain but progress as we ended America's Apartheid laws; as we got public accommodation; as we secured voting rights; as we obtained open housing; as young people got the right to vote; as we lost Malcolm, Martin, Medgar, Bobby, John and Viola. The team that got us here must be expanded, not



(Photo: Richard J. Brown)

abandoned. Twenty years ago, tears welled up in our eyes as the bodies of Schwerner, Goodman and Cheney, were dredged from the depths of a river in Mississippi. Twenty years later, our communities, black and Jewish, are in anguish, anger and pain. Feelings have been hurt on both sides. There is a crisis in communications. Confusion is in the air. But we cannot afford to lose our way. We may agree to agree, or agree to disagree on issues, but we must bring back civility to the tensions. We are co-partners in a long and rich religious history—the Judeo-Christian traditions. Many blacks and Jews have a shared passion for social justice at home and peace abroad. We must seek a revival of the spirit, inspired by a new vision and new possibilities. We must return to higher ground. We are bound by Moses and Jesus, but also connected with Islam Mohammed. These three great religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—were all born in the revered and holy city of Jerusalem. We are bound by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Heschel, crying out from their graves for us to reach common ground. We are bound by shared blood and shared sacrifices. We are much too intelligent; much too bound by our Judeo-Christian heritage; much too victimized by racism, sexism, militarism, and anti-semitism; much too threatened as historical scapegoats to go on divided one from another. We must turn from finger pointing to clasped hands. We must share our burdens and our joys with each other once again. We must turn to each other and not on each other.

Twenty years later, we cannot be satisfied by just restoring the old coalition. Old wine skins must make room for new wine. We must heal and expand. The Rainbow Coalition is making room for Arab-Americans. They too know the pain and hurt of racial and religious rejection. They must not continue to be made pariahs. The Rainbow Coalition is making room for Hispanic-Americans who this very night are living under the threat of the Simpson-Mazzoli Bill, and farm workers in Ohio are fighting the Campbell Soup Company with a boycott to achieve legitimate workers rights.

The Rainbow is making room for the Native American, the most exploited people of all and a people with the greatest moral claim among us. We support them as they seek the restoration of their ancient land and water rights. We support them as they seek to preserve their ancestral homelands and the beauty of a land that was once all theirs. They can never receive a fair price for all that they have given us, but they must finally have a fair chance to develop their great resources and to preserve their people and their culture.

The Rainbow includes Asian-Americans, now being killed on our streets—scapegoats for the failures of corporate, industrial and economic policies. The Rainbow is making room for young Americans. Twenty years ago, our young people were dying in a war for which they could not even vote. Twenty years later, they have the power to stop a war in Central America and the responsibility to vote in great numbers. Young America must be politically active in 1984. The choice is war or peace. We must make room for them.

The Rainbow includes disabled Americans. The color “chrome” fits in the Rainbow. The disabled have their handicap revealed and their genius concealed; while the able-bodied have their genius revealed and their disability concealed. But ultimately, we must judge people by their values and their contributions. I would rather have Roosevelt in a wheelchair than Reagan on a horse.

The Rainbow is making room for small farmers. They have suffered tremendously under the Reagan regime. They will either have 90 percent parity or 100 percent charity. We must address their concerns and make room for them. The Rainbow includes lesbians and gays. No American citizen ought to be denied equal protection under the law.

We must be unusually committed and caring as we expand our family to include new members. All of us must be tolerant and understanding as the fears and anxieties of the rejected and of the Party leadership express themselves in so many different ways. Too often what we call hate—as if it were deeply rooted in some philosophy or strategy—is simply ignorance, anxiety, paranoia, fear and insecurity. We must be long suffering as we seek to right the wrongs of our Party and our nation. We must expand our Party, heal our Party and unify our Party. That is the means to our mission.

II. THE COURAGE OF CONVICTION: THE MISERY INDEX, THE DANGER INDEX, AND REAGANOMICS

We are often reminded that we live in a great nation—and we do. But it can be greater still. The Rainbow is mandating a new definition of greatness. We must not measure greatness from the mansion down, but from the manger up. Jesus said that we should not be judged by the bark we wear but by the fruit we bear. Jesus said that we must measure greatness by how we treat the least of these.

President Reagan says the nation is in recovery. Those 90,000 corporations that made a profit last year but paid no federal taxes are recovering. The 37,000 military contractors who have benefitted from Reagan's more than doubling of the military budget in peace time are surely recovering. The big corporations and rich individuals who received the bulk of the three-year multi-billion tax cut from Mr. Reagan are recovering. But no such comparable recovery is underway for the least of these. Rising tides don't lift all boats, especially those boats stuck at the bottom.

For the boats stuck at the bottom there is a rising MISERY INDEX. This administration has made life for the poor miserable. Its attitude toward poor people has been contemptuous. Its policies and programs have been cruel and unfair to working people. It must be held accountable in November for an increasing infant mortality rate among the poor. In Detroit, one of the great cities of the western world, babies are dying at the same rate as in Honduras, the most underdeveloped nation in our hemisphere. This administration

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