

“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr”

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(Author, *Economic Cataracts* and forthcoming *A Clear View*)

A Four Part Series



“Our Chartered Plane Heading to another Campaign Stop ”(May, 1984)

(Rachel only an example crop all but the center picture and do your thing)

Part I: The Prelude!

Part II: Reflections, with America's second African-American candidate for a party's nomination for President)

Part III: Jesse Jackson, our week at Bill Cosby's House and why!

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“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr”- Part I(The Prelude)

With the recent announcement of Rev. Jackson has Parkinson's disease I thought Omaha Star readers would enjoy some of my reflections from the historical times I spent with this civil rights icon.

The Prelude: In the spring of 1981 I joined the campaign of Andrew Young for Mayor in Atlanta, Georgia. I joined as a volunteer driver. I lived in College Park a suburb of Atlanta. My relationship and respect for Andy, as we called him, was instant and wonderful. He was a walking history icon having been in the inner circle of Martin Luther King, Jr, and he was with MLK at the moment the bullet pierced his body April 4th, 1968 when his life at 39 was cut short on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel, in Memphis, Tenn. Jesse Jackson was also at the hotel that day but Andy stood next to him at that fatal moment. Andy was highly principled and a visionary. Andrew Young was a three-term congressman from Georgia (and appointed to Ambassador to the United Nations by friend and President Jimmy Carter in 1977.

During my life in Atlanta, beginning in 1980, I was often referred to as a computer genius, I was not. I had retired from IBM after 12 years to open the first retail computer store in Atlanta. That background fueled the myth of my so-called “computer genius” status in Atlanta's black community. After a spell of being one of Andy's campaign volunteer drivers, he got word of my computer skills and asked me whether I could computerize the “get out the vote” aspects of his campaign. With the innovative use of my Apple II computer and the availability of racial and historical voting patterns, I created a model for election day management that was credited as being a major reason for his victory to Mayor. I was given a hero status in the Atlanta civil rights community and quickly became a national resource for high profile black campaigns.

During the campaign there were regular visits to Atlanta with Andy from the Rev. Jesse Jackson. I never met Rev Jackson during those days. After the Andy's election victory and during the transition from the Maynard Jackson administration, I was given several major transitional assignments and gained a reputation as a smart numbers and computer guy. I was rewarded by being appointed to a number of key position in Mayor Youngs administration including, budget director, General Services Director, Commissioner of Planning and Computer services Director.

In early 1983 Mayor Young dispatched me to Chicago (while still on the payroll in Atlanta) and I served as a major unpaid advisor to Mayoral candidate Harold Washington. I trained Washington's campaign on my innovative computer approach used in Atlanta. They loved it and after his victory as Chicago's first Black Mayor my reputation continued to rise as a one of the few black campaign resources in the US. (Time Magazine, 1983)

I chronicle this prelude to set the stage for my meeting of Jesse Jackson. I finally was introduced to Rev. Jesse Jackson in the summer of 1983, right after Harold Washington's historic victory to Mayor of Chicago. Returning to my routine in Andy's administration, and a developing relationship with Jackson, who at that point I idolized, the routine shortly became interrupted

when Jesse Jackson asked me to accompany him every weekend on his very high-profile voter registration campaign throughout the black, urban and rural southern states. We were a great team, I produced the data for his speeches and the voter registration tour gained national attention by media and black communities nationwide. Jesse Jackson was the hottest thing in America. That star status evolved into a chant, “Run Jesse Run”, calling for him to run for President of the United States. Soon after Jesse asked me to take a leave of absence from Andy's administration, to organize and run his exploratory effort and later his run for the Presidency. I accepted.

My nearly two years with Jesse Jackson during his historical run for President will be the subject of Part II of **“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Jr.”- Part II (Reflections of my time with America’s second African-American candidate for his party’s nomination for President)**

“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr”- Part II (Reflections with America’s second African-American candidate for his party’s nomination for President - 1984)

With the recent announcement that Rev. Jackson has Parkinson’s disease I thought Omaha Star readers would enjoy some of my reflections from the historical times I spent with this civil rights icon. *Part I (The Prelude)*, is recommended reading)

Before joining Rev. Jackson to organize and manage his run for President, I confess I was awed and held him up as super human. handsome, articulate, man of GOD, one of Martin Luther King’s inner circle, champion and leader of the infamous Operation Push in Chicago, wow!!

After joining Rev. Jackson in the late summer of 1983, I slowly began to learn, that he, along with the rest of us, was not super human, but in some respects insecure, frail and in less than perfect health. Jesse and I shared very similar personal statistics, almost the same height, 6’3” and weight, about 220 (at that time), birthdays within months of each other and very similar skin tone. At that point (1983) when we arrived in a city, and had the time, we would go down into the intercity, interrupt and challenge the guys on the block, to a three on three basketball game. Me, Jesse and Frank Watson, his white long-term staffer. I remember Jesse would cheat. The boys hollered but let him getaway with all sorts of infractions, after all he was the Jesse Jackson. I always looked forward to those encounters, too many to recount.

Born Oct. 8, 1941, in Greenville, S.C. Jackson's ancestry includes black slaves, Cherokee Indians and a bit of Irish. Born out of wedlock, Jackson was the result of a desire by his biological father, Noah Louis Robinson, to have a male child. Jackson took the last name of his stepfather, Charles Henry Jackson.

Married Jacqueline Lavinia Brown in 1964. They have five children: Santita, Jesse Louis Jr., Jonathan Luther, Yusef DuBois and Jacqueline Lavinia. Ordained as a Baptist minister 1968, the year King was assassinated.

Jesse suffered from sickle cell anemia, like many African Americans. The anemia effected his stamina, he took prescription medications to keep the anemia in check. At the height of the 1984 race we mostly started the day at 5 to 6am and didn’t bed down til after midnight. We were all exhausted but somehow Jesse endured. I had many conversations with the Secret Service crews who were with us 24/7, about the length of our days and their hope was, that we would slow down a little. While I was the campaign manager Jesse was the force that pushed us and led the charge for those never-ending days and nights.

Technically over the time I was with Jesse I carried many titles. Walter Mondale, ultimately the party nominee, and his team put in a reasonable day with three to four campaign stops a week, our campaign would put in three or four stops a day. In the early days in 1983, as we traveled the country, we must have visited over 200 black churches across the US. As the “movement” grew,

the churches were not large enough to accommodate the crowds and audiences became multi-racial.

Those stops were mostly always in different cities, exhausting mentally and physically. We sometimes were two to three hours late to our planned campaign stop. When we finally arrived, huge crowds were always waiting, waiting for the most popular Black man in the nation at that time, candidate Jesse Jackson. Privately, Jesse and I were never more humbled than witnessing those standing room only crowds, who waited hours to see and hear Jesse. Every day he would approach the microphone with his prepared speech and literally, have the audience screaming and begging for more. Immediately, after we left the stage he would pull me aside and insecurely ask, “was I ok?”. At first, I thought he must be joking, but soon learned that in spite of his gifts, he needed reassurances. That simple humanity revealed itself in many other ways. Jesse demanded total loyalty and expected his team to dedicate their lives to him. By the time I joined the bandwagon, Jesse had several staff who had been with him for years. I should note that MLK’s circle were just that committed, for life. When I left Jesse, the presidential election was over, Mondale had lost to Reagan and we had organized the Rainbow Coalition, (I as its first Executive Director). I informed him that I was returning home to my wife and two young kids in Atlanta. Jesse was not happy with me, acted surprised and appalled that I would dare leave him. I remember clearly, his statement “you can’t leave now, we’ve got work to do”.

Jesse Jackson’s intelligence was totally underestimated by all, including myself. Jesse was as smart as any man I had ever met. He was not expected to be able to sit on the debate stage with six US Senators and one former Governor and handle himself and be able to have command and knowledge of the issues of the US and the World. Jesse surprised us all. I will tell you how, in the next edition.

My nearly two years with Jesse Jackson during his historical run for President will be the subject of Part III of **“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr.”- Part III (Jesse Jackson, our week at Bill Cosby’s House and why!)**

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When Rev. Jesse Jackson decided to run to be the Democratic nominee for President of the US against the sitting President, Ronald Reagan the black community went wild. But the story behind the excitement has hardly been told. The white political establishment dismissed Jackson’s candidacy, as not serious and in fact somewhat of a joke. Twelve years prior in 1972 black congresswoman Shirley Chisholm had been symbolic at best and never taken seriously. After all, Rev. Jackson was a country preacher full of cute rhythmic rhetoric for black folk but spoke to nothing of substance. While Jackson was a good talker, the perception was that he lacked the depth, knowledge and intelligence to understand and speak on the national and international issues. Black leadership felt the same way, but only privately. There was a fear that Jackson would embarrass himself and black people. Maybe even undermine the black cause. Surely, he wouldn’t be able to raise the millions of dollars needed to run a credible campaign.

The biggest hurdle, everyone felt, was he lacked the scope and intellect to address the global issues of the day. There were 6 past and present United States Senators and a former Governor also running. There were going to be dozens of nationally televised debates. With the prospect of Jackson on stage, there was unilateral dismay at that possibility. That is with one exception, Jesse Jackson; he was not intimidated. Jesse had a plan.

After long conversations with the actor/comedian Bill Cosby, a plan was hatched. Cosby would make his residential complex in Massachusetts to the Jesse Jackson for President Campaign. First let me describe the environment. For one, you did not visit the Cosby complex. The location was unknown and to visit you were picked up via a limo and escorted to some remote part of Massachusetts, the complex.

The Complex consisted of a former farm, lots of land and four major structures. 1. The Cosby residence, (more bedrooms than you could count), 2. a residence for his mother, 3. a building housing equipment, etc. and lastly a “Guest House”.

The guest house was a former barn converted to accommodate 16 guest with bedroom and bath, a conversational pit for about 20 people, 16 apothecary jars full of all sorts of goodies, raisins, orange slices, chips, etc. The Cosby main attraction and toy, was a huge Espresso contraction that could produce all sorts of steamed coffee, it was “Starbucks”. For the record I spent much

time at the Cosby's with my hand in the orange slices. (by the way somebody was constantly replacing any intrusions into the jars)

The Plan. For one solid week experts on national and international issues were flown into Boston, picked up by limo, taken to the Cosby's, brought to the Guest House. Each day those experts spent hours briefing Rev. Jackson on the complex issues of the era. Hours, and to my amazement Jesse Jackson, not only assimilated the issues but committed his lessons to both his memory and his own perspectives, day after day. The experts were treated at the end of the day with a private dinner with the entire Cosby family. Each night, Cosby called on one of the three chefs he had on staff for a masterful meal. At a table were the experts, Cosby's family, Jesse and I and two other staff members. Each night about 16 people at the table, each night a different magnificent set of matching table ware (never the same that week). The next morning the previous day experts were bided farewell and the next day's experts arrived. The pattern continued for 5 days.

At the end the week, I realized how brilliant Jackson was. He had in one weeks' time accumulated the working knowledge of the global issues of the day and retained the knowledge throughout the campaign and was a competitive debater on the national stage for the world to see. Jesse Jackson gained the respect of the nation and never was underestimated again.

In the Final installment of this series: **“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr.”- Part IV (Jackson's dilemma, to run or not to run, the Hotel Room meeting that changed history)**

“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr.”- Part IV (Jackson’s dilemma, to run or not to run, the Hotel Room meeting that changed history); In the Final installment of this series.

Jesse Jackson Sr. has made many pilgrimages, negotiating and freeing many American’s in the sensitive world of formal and informal diplomacy. None were more dramatic than in his run for President in 1984. December of 1983 he traveled to Syria and successfully freed an American Soldier (Lt. Goodman) who had been captured and held hostage by the Syrian government. Later in June of 1984, Jackson freed American and Cuban prisoners, capping a dramatic exercise in personal diplomacy with President Fidel Castro of Cuba. Mr. Jackson's chartered Boeing 707 arrived at Dulles International Airport just before midnight with 16 American prisoners aboard and 7 Cuban political prisoners. Jackson took a large retinue on these trips, but in both cases asked me to stay in the US and keep the campaign operation running smoothly. I agreed, but begrudgingly. I sought the excitement that I knew would come during and after the trips. I often reflect, I should have insisted on traveling on those historical journeys. One of Jackson’s long-term associates and one of President Carter’s Labor Department appointees, Lamond Godwin, did not work for the campaign but quite honestly, was my constant rival for Jackson’s favor. Often, he and I were mistaken for each other. (In the cover picture: on Jesse’s right was my dear friend and the late, Dr. Ron Waters, Political Science Professor at Howard University, myself on Jesse’s left and the aforementioned Mr., Godwin on my left.)

One trip Jackson made, received little or no media coverage, yet, the trip was maybe his most significant historically speaking. Jesse Jackson made this little-known trip to Europe in the fall of 1983. The trip had several objectives, primarily it was an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Russians to release several Jewish Dissidents, who sought to escape from the oppressive treatment there. Jackson flew and set up base in a hotel in Europe with a large entourage including some Jewish followers, and Lamond Godwin, my nemesis. I was charged to continue the preparation for the pending formal announcement of his run for the Presidency.

I forget the number of days the delegation was away, but soon there emerged a problem. Jesse called and informed me that there wasn’t enough money for the delegation to check out of the Hotel. At that time the pending campaign was unable to assist, nor would the expense be determined to be within the rules of the FEC. Jesse asked me to reach out too many of his

wealthy celebrity friends and supporters and he would do the same. In a few days the money was raised and Jackson and the delegation checked out of the Hotel and flew into Washington DC, he was met by a small crowd of insiders and myself.

When the dust settled, Jesse, Mr. Godwin and myself were in Jesse's hotel room, snacking and talking about the trip. Jackson was very, very discouraged and expressed to Mr. Godwin and I that he had second thoughts about running. He went on to describe the horror of the experience of being not able to raise the money to get out of the hotel in Europe and to him it was a sign that he wouldn't be able to raise enough money to run for president, surely if he couldn't check out of a hotel. Mr. Godwin who was along on the trip agreed whole heartily. Jesse was ready right there in the hotel in DC to halt immediately his run for President. He and Godwin were feeding on each other and the momentum was growing, no run. I remained mostly quiet and in shock.

Finally, Jesse turned to me and said "Preston, what do you think?"

I made a 5 to 6-minute case for why he should run, but my final pitch was this sentence: "Jesse, you don't have a choice, this race is bigger than you are, the people demand that you run". There was silence in the room, for what seemed like an hour but more like 5 minutes. The next thing said was by Jackson, he said, "Let's order room service and get to work"!!! The rest is history.