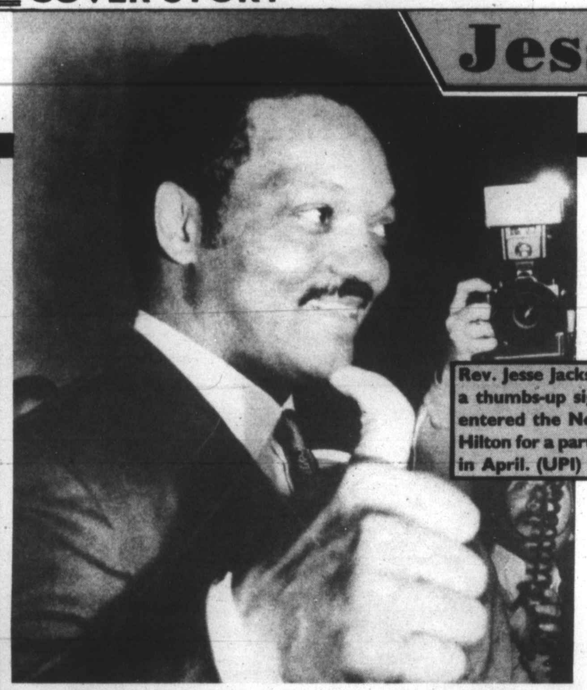
Jesse Jackson — A Race Already Won

By Linda Harris



Rev. Jesse Jackson gave a thumbs-up sign as he entered the New York Hilton for a party forum in April. (UPI)

He struts. He brags. He broods. He is by turns charismatic and distant. He is clearly a leader; a man accustomed to bringing crowds to their feet. He is loved by many, disdained by more, but he is rarely ignored. Jesse Jackson has become a permanent part of the political and social fabric of American life. It is an amazing feat for a man who is not rich, does not and has not headed a powerful corporation, has never been elected to public office and, who, despite being an ordained minister, has never had a full-time pastorate.

Although he is only 46, Jesse Jackson's background has already taken on the myth-like quality usually reserved for long-dead heroes. We know that he was born on October 8, 1941, in Greenville, South Carolina to the beautiful, 16-year old unwed Helen Jackson, known for her lovely singing voice. His father, Noah Robinson, a married man almost twenty years older than Helen, lived right next door.

Jackson grew up in the ambiguous atmosphere the black community holds for "outside" children. He was a bright and beautiful boy, loved by the community that nurtured him, but at the same time not able to shake the stigma of his birth.

In her profile of Jackson in the January, 1988, issue of Vanity Fair, author Gail Sheehy tells the story of children at Greenville's Happy Hearts Park taunting Jesse for not having a legitimate father. They called him, "Nothing but a nobody." It is author Sheehy's suggestion that Jesse Jackson is still running from the hurtful words of those early days.

And run he does. In 1984 Jackson ran a spirited but uneven race for the presidency. It was a campaign marked as much by internal combustion as external disorganization. It was during that race that he admitted calling Jews "Hymie" and New York "Hymietown." He also refused to disassociate himself from Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan. His candidacy was seen by many as an annoying but temporary aberration. When the 1984 presidential campaign was finished most political pundits thought Jackson was,too. They were wrong.

It can be assumed that Jesse Jackson saw something in the American people in 1984 that the political analysts missed, because he was back and ready in 1988.

The Jesse Jackson who won in primaries in Alabama, Puerto Rico, The District of Columbia, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana and Virginia and caucuses in seven other states was a different man in many ways from the Jesse who ran in 1984. He had largely won the battle to keep the passion in his rhetoric while getting rid of the shrillness. He had found legitimate ways of relating to concerns that also affect white Americans without sacrificing his commitment to the minority community.

This time around there was the sense that candidate Jackson had found time to do some homework. Not every issue was clearly thought out and not every stand could be supported with fiscal logic but the same could be said of every other candidate. He,along with the rest of the field, suffered from a bigger supply of heat than light.

In 1988, Jackson was able to put together a management team that not only better reflected his philosophy of a "Rainbow Coalition," but also had more success at getting him from place to place nearly on time. True, unlike most campaigns, this one was still more Jesse-driven than most political operatives like,but it didn't cause the level of chaos that sometimes threatened to disintegrate his 1984 effort.

On time or not, when Jesse Jackson spoke to Americans,whatever their color, wherever their home, he seemed more able than any other candidate to say what was on their minds. How many times did he bellow, "Stop drugs, save jobs?" How often did he urge fairness whether he was talking about inequitable taxes in this economy or discriminatory policies in South Africa? Jackson let his listeners know he understood that fear, work and fairness are not just this year's political issues; they are realities we all understand.

Whether or not Jesse Jackson the candidate was treated fairly this time around will be argued about by supporters, detractors and historians for a long time. Was he patronized with soft questions? Was the media penchant for calling him "Jesse" a way to remind us all that he was still seen as just a black "boy?" Or is the fact that he outlasted a large, if mediocre, field proof that America was more ready for a black presidential candidate than most people thought? Does the fact that even the most reluctant political experts agree that Jesse Jackson has changed the face of American politics forever mean that it has not all been an awful waste of time for this dynamic, imperfect but always fascinating man?

Unimaginative logic would say that because Jackson won't be vice-president this time or maybe not president or vice president some other year, it is a personal failure for him, a symbolic failure for all black people and an indictment of America.

Is it possible that neither of those revered offices is what Jesse Jackson's running is all about?

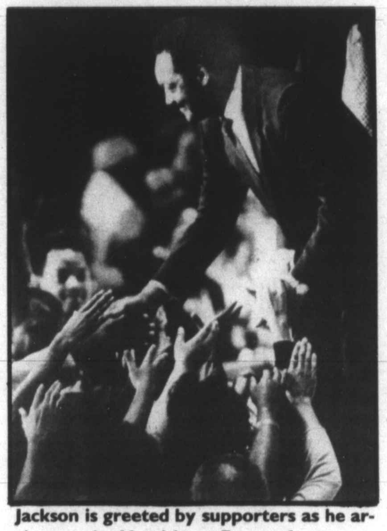
Let's go back to that "outside child" who ran away from mean words and an uncertain sense of place. Look where he ran. Jesse Jackson could have become a crime czar. He is smart enough and certainly glib enough, but he didn't.

Jackson had a chance to repeat history when 19-year old Jacqueline Lavinia Davis, a lovely, bright sophomore at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, got pregnant. He could have run away from her but he didn't. They got married and they've stayed married.

Only Jesse Jackson knows when he decided to be somebody or,if, when he decided to be more than he was, he had a certain goal or job in mind. His dream was bigger than lots of money and a big car.

Democratic presidential candidate Jesse Jackson and his wife Jackie celebrate his May 3rd victory in the District of Columbia primary as they sing "We Are One" at a victory rally. (UPI)

What is known is that his race led him to the Southern Crusade and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He has been kicked and cursed by the law, but not for drugging and thieving. They were blows in honest battles for freedom.



Jackson is greeted by supporters as he arrives at the Harrisburg Forum for a campaign rally in the state capitol, one day before the Pennsylvania primary election. (UPI)

Perhaps what is most amazing about this black man who was raised, like most of us, in a largely hostile environment, is that he is an idealist. Only an idealist would run so long and hard for a job so elusive for the white men throughout history who have lusted for it. Elusive for them, probably impossible for him. Only an idealist would fight so hard to try to get the rest of us to vote. To believe in the power of the ballot is to be the ultimate American.

Jackson's drive for voter registration is the best evidence of his belief that we are each "somebody" and that we can make a difference and that we should feel responsible for trying to influence what happens around us, even if the candidate isn't black and even if it is raining.

Jesse Jackson is not perfect. He's not even real close. In fact there have often been rumors that he is sometimes too human for comfort. For years he has been dogged by his behavior the night Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated when he claimed to have been the last to talk to King. Jackson insisted the blood on the shirt he wore for a nearly a day after the shooting came from

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