Two Gentle Congresswomen: Proud and Black

By Beatrice Levin

Barbara Jordan's swimming accident and near-drowning in her pool stunned the nation. Her friends and followers were relieved that brave Barbara made such a good recovery.

Among the black women in politics who made history in the twentieth century, no two have been more influential than Shirley Chisholm and Barbara Jordan.

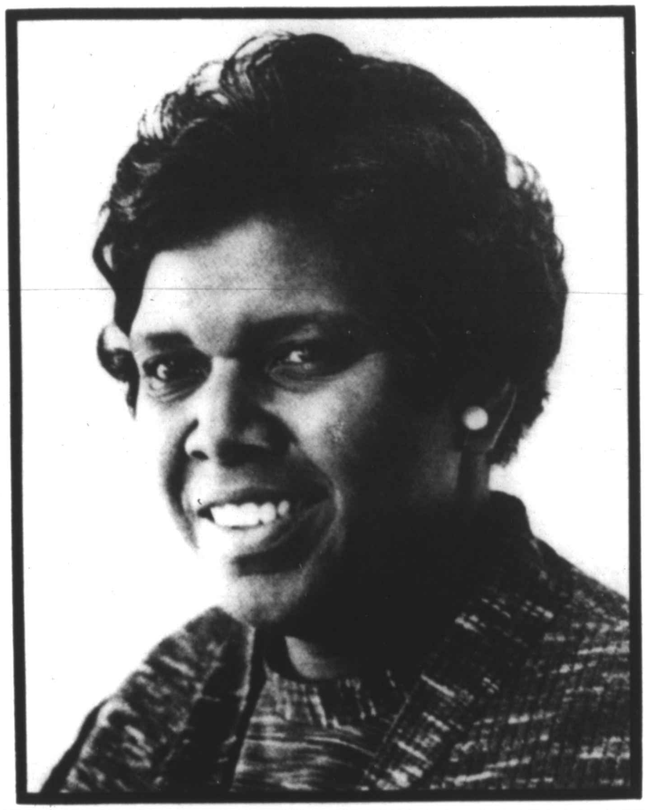
Shirley Chisholm observes, "I want to be remembered as a 20th century black woman who was a catalyst for change, unbought and unbossed."

Certainly, Barbara Jordan, will be remembered as "a catalyst for change." When Barbara Jordan first appeared in the Senate, she was amused to be addressed as "the gentle lady from Texas." Lady she was, and "lady" she remains, but only sometimes "gentle." In fact, Barbara Jordan has been criticized for her moderate approach. She has always picked her shots carefully and tackled a few measures at a time. At 52, Barbara Jordan is a professor at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. Struggling against illness, she remains a liberal, encouraging scholars and students to bring pressure to bear on politicians and to go into politics themselves. She continues to take an independent stand in the face of criticism. She has long been said to "walk a chalk line" but now in a wheelchair or using a walker, her clout and brain are as sharp as ever.

Her latest campaign is for a national health care plan. "The hour is too late for us to be frightened away from this issue by the medical profession and cries of 'socialized medicine,' " she told a Gray Panthers crowd recently. "You can talk about private, not-for-profit charitable organizations all you wish. They simply don't have enough money to do the job . . ."

Shirley Chisholm

Barbara Jordan never supported the Democratic platform plank endorsing President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War policies. In addition, she appeared as a character witness in the trial of fellow-Texan John B. Connally. Though Texans had originally elected her to office, the "gentle lady from Texas" opposed the oil depletion allowance. She was one of the first Freshman Democrats in the U.S. House to revolt against the risks of continued domination of Congress by the President, one of the first to voice her conviction that Lyndon B. Johnson should resign because of his pursuit of the Vietnam War, and one of the few to urge the extension of the Voting Rights Act to Texas.



Barbara Jordan

In August, 1975, when President Gerald Ford signed the bill extending the Voting Rights Act to Texas and other regions with "language minorities," Barbara Jordan, her eye on the large index cards from which Ford read his remarks before signing the bill, asked the President if he would autograph one card and give her all the cards. Ford used a felt-tip pin to sign the card and graciously handed all of them to a smiling Jordan.

Later, Barbara Jordan admitted she is not much of an autograph collector. "But this is my first big legislative victory." She had acquired a cherished souvenir.

The daughter of a Houston preacher, Barbara Jordan graduated from Texas Southern University, a predominantly black college in the very neighborhood where she was born and reared. Eventually in this area, she had a law office decorated with photos of Lyndon Johnson, John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey.

Barbara Jordan launched her political career by stuffing envelopes for the Johnson-Kennedy campaign in 1960. She had earned a law degree from Boston University, but had no practice. One evening while registering black voters at a Houston church, Barbara Jordan was informed the speaker had failed to show up. She volunteered to speak. What an impact that deep Jehovah-like voice made! Her career as an envelope stuffer abruptly ended, and she was soon elected to the State Legislature.

Promptly Miss Jordan began fighting for extension of workmen's compensation benefits and for a minimum wage.

Barbara Jordan was the nation's first black governor, if only for a day, when on June 10, 1972, both the Governor and Lieutenant Governor took the day off, and Jordan served as president pro tempore of the Texas Senate. Within a few years, she established a reputation for being "the first black woman everything."

Barbara Jordan's experiences with hardship and injustice formed her philosophy. She warns against forgetting that women are still looked on as a minority. "Somewhere in the back of our minds is the thought that we are not quite equal. That's nobody's fault but our own."

Seldom in American history did a member of Congress attain so prominent a place in so short a time as did Jordan during the hot summer of 1974. Her impressive role in the impeachment procedures of President Richard Nixon (in a voice that has been described as

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