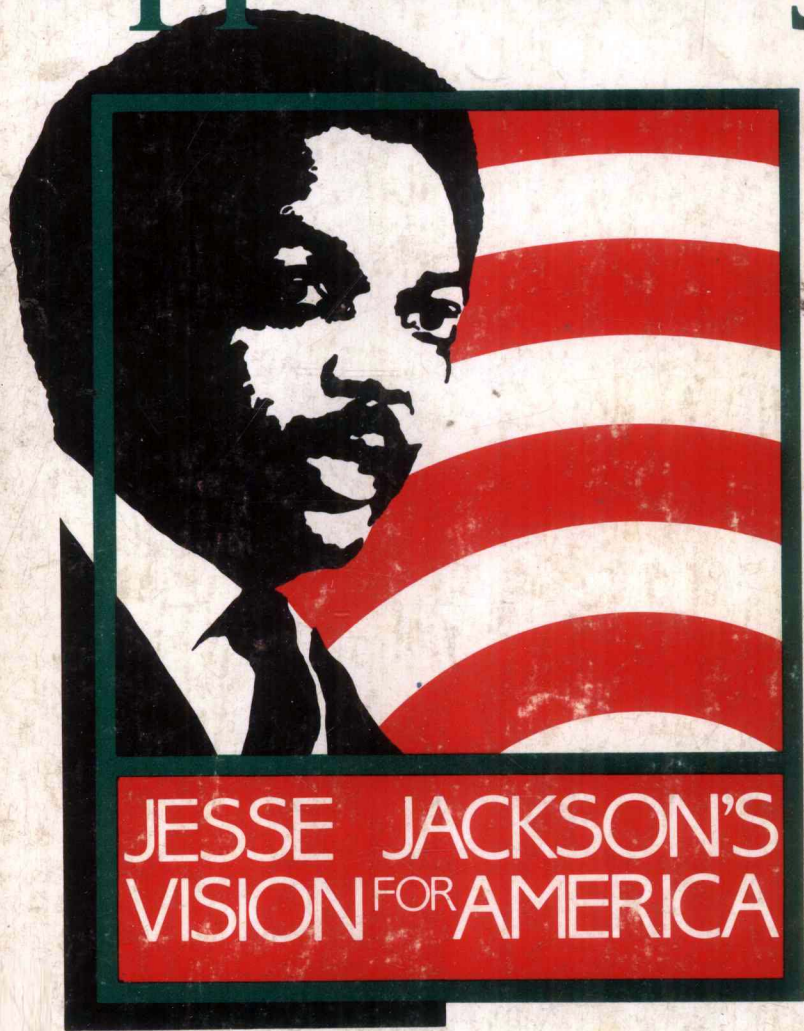


# Beyond Opportunity



Roger D. Hatch

# BEYOND OPPORTUNITY

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Roger D. Hatch

FORTRESS PRESS

PHILADELPHIA

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Second printing 1988

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Hatch, Roger D.

Beyond opportunity.

1. Jackson, Jesse, 1941- —Political and social views. 2. United States—Politics and government—1981- . 3. United States—Economic policy—1981- . 4. United States—Social policy—1980- . I. Title.

E840.8.J35H38 1988 323.4'092'4 87-45892

ISBN 0-8006-2085-2

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*For all those  
who continue to struggle against the headwinds  
seeking peace and justice.*

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## *Introduction*

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American society is currently engaged in an important debate about the meaning and significance of racial justice and civil rights issues, a debate which, in one form or another, has been going on for the past twenty years since the end of the Civil Rights Movement. On one side of this debate is the whole range of traditional civil rights organizations and their friends and allies. They argue that over the centuries racism has become so interwoven in the social and institutional fiber of America that broad, aggressive measures (affirmative actions) are necessary in the political, educational, and economic arenas to root out racism, reverse the current situation, and create a society characterized by racial justice. Jesse Jackson is among the most prominent members of this group, and his entry into national politics has brought his position into full public view.

On the other side at present is the Reagan administration and its friends and allies. They have been arguing for defining "civil rights" in the narrowest possible terms as the strictly legal right of individuals not to be intentionally discriminated against in voting or seeking employment or housing. Accordingly, they claim that mechanisms such as affirmative action and special set-aside programs for minorities are illegitimate because these mechanisms are color-conscious rather than color-blind, and they have repeatedly gone to court to press their claims. Further, they assert that traditional civil rights groups and leaders have strayed from their legitimate roles because they concern themselves with political, economic, educational, and even foreign policy issues rather than with civil rights, narrowly conceived.

Many Americans are also engaged in a debate about Jesse Jackson and the meaning and significance of his presence in national politics. Political analysts offered strong, clashing assessments of his 1984 presidential campaign, ranging from the *New Republic's* conclusion that "Jackson has failed to project anything like a coherent vision of a just society at home, which might bind blacks and whites together"<sup>1</sup> to Barry Commoner's claim that Jackson was "giving powerful voice to a comprehensive political program—a rousing return to old-fashioned issue-oriented politics not seen in the Democratic Party since Franklin D. Roosevelt."<sup>2</sup> Some charged that Jackson's campaign was "merely symbolic," unrelated to the real political campaign,<sup>3</sup> while others claimed that "American politics will never be the same."<sup>4</sup>

Although Jesse Jackson has been in the public eye for two decades, Barbara Reynolds's 1975 biography, *Jesse Jackson: The Man, the Movement, the Myth*,<sup>5</sup> has been the only book-length treatment of Jackson available until recently. Since his presidential candidacy in 1984, however, he has been the subject of several books. Thomas H. Landess and Richard M. Quinn draw heavily on Reynolds's work in their book analyzing Jackson's twenty-year public career, *Jesse Jackson and the Politics of Race*.<sup>6</sup> Political scientist Adolph L. Reed, Jr., examines his 1984 campaign in *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics*.<sup>7</sup> Sheila D. Collins also writes about the campaign, but from the standpoint of a participant-observer, in *The Rainbow Challenge: The Jackson Campaign and the Future of U.S. Politics*.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Bob Faw and Nancy Skelton, both reporters who covered him in 1984, chronicle the campaign in *Thunder in America: The Improbable Presidential Campaign of Jesse Jackson*.<sup>9</sup>

*Beyond Opportunity* is not intended to duplicate the efforts of any of these authors and it employs a different framework to interpret Jackson and his work. Reynolds focuses on Jackson's personality in explaining his activities. Landess and Quinn build on that and then interpret his political activities in the context of the Southern racist populist politics of the 1890–1940 period, arguing that he and his earlier white Southern counterparts attempted "to paint themselves as leaders who had arisen out of the ranks of the oppressed, in order to speak for 'the people' in corrupt political forums controlled by the

rich and powerful."<sup>10</sup> Reed focuses on his 1984 campaign, interpreting it in the general context of black electoral politics, and observes that the campaign "was a ritualistic event—a media-conveyed politics of symbolism, essentially tangential to the critical debate over reorganization of American capitalism's governing consensus."<sup>11</sup> Because it was "not so much a political campaign as a crusade,"<sup>12</sup> Reed concludes that Jackson's presidential campaign actually undermined electoral politics within the black community. Faw and Skelton look on his bid for the Democratic party's 1984 presidential nomination as another—although highly interesting and certainly enigmatic—campaign for the presidency. Collins, by contrast, views his 1984 campaign in the context of a variety of twentieth-century movements for social change, which she terms "underground streams in American political life." She concludes: "Jackson's genius lay in linking nonelectoral forms of political mobilization and protest with traditional electoral politics. . . . Although embryonic and fragile, the Rainbow Coalition represents the construction of a new kind of politics appropriate to the history, cultural realities, and changing socioeconomic context of late twentieth-century America."<sup>13</sup>

While each of these interpretive perspectives has some validity and utility, each lies outside of Jackson's own understanding of his political activities, and, indeed, all lie far afield of the institution to which he is most indebted—the black church. James Melvin Washington has examined him from this vantage point in "Jesse Jackson and the Symbolic Politics of Black Christendom."<sup>14</sup> He concludes: "It would be a mistake to conclude that Jesse Jackson is a creation of the news media. His roots are planted deeply within the black church's rich tradition of social, political, and economic activism."<sup>15</sup> This tradition is not simply a black counterpart to the white Christian tradition; it combines religion and politics in a unique way. The examination of Jackson that follows in *Beyond Opportunity* shares Washington's general perspective. To understand Jackson and his activities, one must recognize that it is the black church and the Civil Rights Movement out of which he comes and from which he continues to draw as he moves in the arena of electoral politics. It is in this arena—where religion, politics, and the quest for racial justice come together—that he operates.

From time to time, a political analyst will observe that members



of that fraternity ought to be paying attention to what Jesse Jackson is saying, to his ideas, and not just to his personality or his political and rhetorical style. As David Broder noted, "We have paid too little attention to what Jackson is saying. Ultimately, . . . he will be judged by his personal qualities and his record, as well as his ideas. . . . [B]ut the content of what Jackson is saying is obviously important to the nation's political future."<sup>16</sup>

Jackson, however, is not a significant person in American public life primarily because he is a creative thinker; few important political actors are. His creativity lies in his ability to understand and then explain complex issues in simple, direct ways to ordinary people and in his ability to motivate and mobilize people. His mind is agile, and he moves back and forth from abstract ideas to concrete issues with ease and confidence. Yet his way of looking at reality has a coherence and an integrity to it easily missed when viewing a 30-second clip of one of his speeches on the evening news. An examination of his speeches over the years reveals that his statements are more than flippant responses or statements carefully tailored to a particular audience. His statements and his views grow out of a consistent way of looking at reality that is deeply rooted in the black church and in the Civil Rights Movement.

He shares this view of reality with many others influenced by these same organizations. This view, however, has been largely hidden from the majority of Americans over the years because of the veil drawn across American life by racism. Jackson has called this viewing American life "from a black perspective, which is the perspective of the rejected."<sup>17</sup> He goes on to note that "life viewed from a black perspective encompasses more of America than life viewed from a white male middle-class perspective."<sup>18</sup> Until he entered national politics, this view of reality had been largely absent from that arena.

By understanding something of Jesse Jackson and his work and ideas, we gain more, however, than just knowledge about an important and controversial figure in American life. First, we gain some understanding of the unfinished work of the Civil Rights Movement following the passage in 1964 of the Public Accommodations Act and in 1965 of the Voting Rights Act. Eliminating racial

injustice in the form of segregation laws has not been sufficient to establish racial justice. He helps us understand what more is required. Second, we gain some understanding of contemporary American electoral politics. His role as an outsider reveals much about the limits of American politics, particularly its racial character and its present failure of vision. Third, we gain some understanding of the creative, sustaining resource that the black church has been and continues to be in American society. As he might say, while the black church examines life from a black perspective, its assets and contributions are not for blacks only.

In *Beyond Opportunity* I will examine Jesse Jackson's basic ideas and his view of reality and interpret his actions in light of them. I have based this study on a comprehensive examination of more than a thousand of his speeches and addresses given over the past two decades. In addition, I served as a member of his staff for six months in 1980, having the opportunity to view him and his activity from close range. Along with Frank E. Watkins, I recently edited *Straight from the Heart*,<sup>19</sup> a collection of Jackson's speeches that he calls "comprehensive" and "representative." Since his speeches in *Straight from the Heart* are the only ones readily available to the public, I have chosen, whenever feasible, to support and illustrate my arguments with citations from speeches that appear there rather than from other sources so that readers may, if they wish, form alternative interpretations of the same materials.

I wish to thank the many people who have contributed to this book: in particular, members of the Social Ethics Seminar and members of the Department of Religion at Central Michigan University, who carefully read and responded to early drafts of several chapters; Dolores Lawrence, Department of Religion Secretary, who graciously took up much of the slack so that I could let several administrative tasks slide in order to work on this volume; the staff at Operation PUSH and the Rainbow Coalition, who allowed ready access to their files; Davis Perkins of Fortress Press, who readily provided advice and assistance throughout the process of writing; Stephanie Egnotovitch, Managing Editor of Fortress Press, who skillfully guided the manuscript through the process of editing and publication; Leslie A. Brown, who assisted in the research and typing;

Karen L. Carter, Warren R. Copeland, Ronald R. Primeau, and Frank E. Watkins, who read the entire manuscript and suggested many helpful changes; and Marcia R. Sawyer, who consistently provides that rare combination of personal and professional support and incisive, constructive criticism.

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## *Beyond Opportunity*

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At the core of Jesse Jackson's approach to every aspect of life is a religious-political vision for America. This vision has its roots in the black church—the institution that nurtured him as a child, that helped mold and guide his dreams and ambitions as a young man, and that has sustained and undergirded his work as an adult. While the black church tradition is exceedingly rich and varied, at its base is an affirmation that is both religious *and* political. It is the affirmation that racism is not true, that all human beings are made in God's image and hence have value. Peter J. Paris has put it well: "The fundamental principle of the black Christian tradition is depicted most adequately in the biblical doctrine of the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples."<sup>1</sup>

This is a religious principle because it is an affirmation about the very nature of reality, in this case about human nature, human association, and the relation of human beings to God. This principle underlies Jackson's central affirmation—"I am somebody"—and his belief in the interrelated, interdependent nature of reality. This principle (especially the "kinship of all peoples" portion) also provides the basis for criticizing all racist arrangements in society; hence its political as well as religious character. Social policies and social arrangements that deny or devalue the worth of people because of their race are wrong. (And it is only by resisting racist arrangements that racially oppressed people can retain their own self-worth:

The history of black people in America shows that blacks have

affirmed their own worth by resisting racism in a variety of ways. These forms of resistance have run the gamut from the private intellectual refusal to believe the degrading things that were said to be true about black people to armed attempts to overthrow various institutionalized forms of racism in America, including the federal government.<sup>2</sup> Jackson has chosen the public arena as the one in which he will resist racism.

Jackson has combined the style of a traditional black preacher with some of the brashness of the more secular black power and black pride movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Throughout his twenty-year public career, he has kept his eye on the vision of a pluralistic, nonracist society in which people recognize how much they need and depend on one another. However, he is not doctrinaire about which methods must be employed to achieve this vision. He will employ any means available, consistent with the goal he seeks, of making American society less racist and more just. In fact, Jackson urges black Americans to use whatever tools they already have. "We must, without cynicism but with realism, exercise every available . . . option open to us."<sup>3</sup> He argues for a "diversified game plan"<sup>4</sup> and uses the image of an orchestra to point to the many complementary means that must be used when seeking racial justice.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the religious-political character of his ideas, which is due to their source in the black church, Jackson is by nature a deeply political human being. Roger Wilkins, in an article in *Mother Jones*, described him as "a natural" when it came to politics:

The main point about Jesse Jackson is not just that he has a fine mind, but that he is to politics what Duke Ellington was to jazz and what Magic Johnson is to basketball. He is a natural. He is nourished by the stuff of politics: the issues, the people, the motion, the turmoil, and the thunder. He is also nourished by his vision of a country that can be better than the one he has known, and by the sense that his efforts can make that vision possible.<sup>6</sup>

Because Jackson's vision, like the central affirmation of the black church tradition, is both religious and political, it is not surprising that his political speeches often contain religious language and imagery and that his sermons usually contain political content. For instance, in announcing his presidential candidacy in 1983, he called

for the creation of “new covenants” between the dispossessed and the Democratic party, organized labor, and corporate America,<sup>7</sup> and described his campaign’s purpose as “(defending the poor, making welcome the outcast, delivering the needy, and being a source of hope for people yearning to be free everywhere.”<sup>8</sup> In his campaign speeches, he typically challenged the Democratic party to change, to open itself up to new elements, noting, “Old wineskins must make room for new wine.”<sup>9</sup> He offered hope by claiming, “The rejected stones can become the cornerstones of a new progressive coalition in America who will help to reshape a new domestic and world order.”<sup>10</sup>

Black churches, regardless of their theological stance, have always addressed politics in one way or another. They have always engaged in social criticism to the extent of repudiating racism in its many embodiments. Sometimes this has taken the form of emphasizing another world in the future and eschewing conventional political involvements. Although this stance often has been viewed as apolitical, the emphasis on another, better world than this one constitutes a powerful indictment and rejection of this world as it is. This view often has been coupled with the judgment that no human activity—be it reform or even revolution—can adequately bring about the kinds of social and political changes necessary to establish justice and peace; it would take the intervention of God.

Leaders in other black churches have argued that conventional political activities are important because they can help establish at least a measure of justice and peace. In this view, religious beliefs about the worth of all people need to be embodied throughout society, not just affirmed in the activities of churches. It was ministers and churches taking this latter stance who became involved in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

### JESSE JACKSON

Jesse Jackson, born October 8, 1941, in Greenville, South Carolina, was a high-school and college student during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>11</sup> Upon graduation from Sterling High School in Greenville in 1959, Jackson, a star athlete, was offered a chance

to try out with a professional baseball team. Jackson, a pitcher, tried out along with a white catcher from Greenville, Dickie Dietz. In the tryout, he struck Dietz out three times. Both were offered contracts, but Dietz was offered \$95,000 to sign, Jackson just \$6,000. Instead, Jackson chose to attend the University of Illinois on a football scholarship. There he hoped to become the first black quarterback to play in the Big Ten conference. During his freshman year, however, he learned that Illinois would continue to reserve the quarterback position for white athletes; he would have to play another position. Consequently, he transferred after his freshman year to North Carolina A & T, a historically black college in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he eventually became student-body president. Jackson arrived in Greensboro just as the first student sit-ins at Woolworth's lunch counter were beginning and soon became one of the leaders of this movement, which soon spread throughout the country. The sit-ins, coming on the heels of his experiences of discrimination in baseball and football, became one of the crucial, formative experiences in his life.

During his college years in Greensboro, he continued his involvement in various civil rights activities, at one time serving as field director of Southeast operations for CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, a multiracial group begun in the 1940s which advocated nonviolent direct action, such as sit-ins, to bring about racial justice. His interest in politics (he worked briefly for North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford) led him to consider obtaining a law degree at Duke University. But he experienced God's call to become a minister, and that call finally won out. So he moved north to attend Chicago Theological Seminary in 1963. His interest in politics, however, was not abandoned. Jackson struggled to find an appropriate way to combine his political and religious interests and convictions. As he later observed: "My religion obligates me to be political, that is, to seek to do God's will and allow the spiritual Word to become concrete justice and dwell among us."<sup>12</sup>

When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) headed by Martin Luther King, Jr., began the voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, in the spring of 1965, Jackson organized a group of seminary students to make the trip from Chicago to Selma to

support the movement. While there, Jackson came to the attention of both Ralph Abernathy, second in command at SCLC, and King. Following the Selma campaign, Jackson returned to Chicago, where he began working for CCCO (the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations), a broad coalition of more than fifty religious, neighborhood, professional, and civic groups working for racial justice in Chicago, particularly in the school system.<sup>13</sup> After the passage of the Voting Rights Act in the summer of 1965, SCLC began its first campaign in the North. It chose Chicago as the site of its activities in part because of CCCO's previous activities. The work of SCLC and CCCO converged and became known as the Chicago Freedom Movement. King rented an apartment on Chicago's West Side and was the most visible leader in this broad-based coalition seeking racial justice. The Chicago Freedom Movement initially focused its work on open housing. This effort in Chicago lasted a little more than a year and culminated in an open-housing agreement with Mayor Richard J. Daley that at best was a compromise, at worst an outright failure for the movement.

Operation Breadbasket, a program to deal with the economic aspects of racial justice already initiated in a few other cities by SCLC, was launched in Chicago in February of 1966, with Jackson among its principal leaders.<sup>14</sup> By the close of SCLC's Chicago campaign in the fall of 1966, Breadbasket was one of the few tangible things SCLC left behind in Chicago. A year later, in August of 1967, King named Jackson Operation Breadbasket's first national director. After King's death in 1968, Ralph Abernathy became King's successor at SCLC. Following several disputes between Abernathy and Jackson, Jackson broke away from SCLC and launched Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity) on Christmas Day of 1971.

## PHASE TWO OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

While it could not have been at all clear at the time, Jackson's arrival on SCLC's staff corresponded to a new phase in the Civil Rights Movement. Jackson joined SCLC's national staff just after Congress had passed the Public Accommodations Act and the Voting



Rights Act and just as the focus in the movement for racial justice was shifting from the blatant denial of equal access provided for in the segregation laws of Southern states to the more subtle, more complex—but no less real—denials of racial justice practiced throughout American society, often popularly (but incorrectly) called “institutional racism.”<sup>15</sup> King characterized this change in goals as the shift from freedom to equality. Having addressed the most egregious racial injustices in the legal and political arenas through the passage of the 1964 Public Accommodations Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, SCLC began to focus on open housing in its Chicago campaign and on the economic aspects of racial justice. SCLC’s attempt to institutionalize this economic focus was epitomized in the establishment in the early 1960s of Operation Breadbasket. Breadbasket’s explicit attention to some of the economic aspects of racial justice was highly controversial activity. Before this, the language of the Civil Rights Movement largely had been that of “civil rights,” “equal opportunity,” “desegregation,” and “integration.” On these topics, there had been an emerging consensus within American society that all of these were generally desirable and were in line with American ideals. But most Americans have never been comfortable with the idea of economic rights—at least not beyond the right to own property—because it seems to smack of socialism or a planned economy. This shift in the struggle for racial justice from freedom to equality (meaning equality of results, not just of opportunity)—however necessary and appropriate—was a difficult one to make in American society. It is a shift that—more than two decades later—still has not yet been agreed upon by a large segment of American society.

No one in the past twenty years has done more to advance public understanding of this shift in the struggle for racial justice than Jesse Jackson. More than any other person, he has epitomized the current phase of the struggle. This book is entitled *Beyond Opportunity* because Jackson’s work over the past score of years has addressed the challenges in establishing racial justice which lie beyond enacting laws providing for equal access and opportunity—namely, achieving equity and parity in all areas of life.

✓ Following King’s view, Jackson frequently distinguishes between