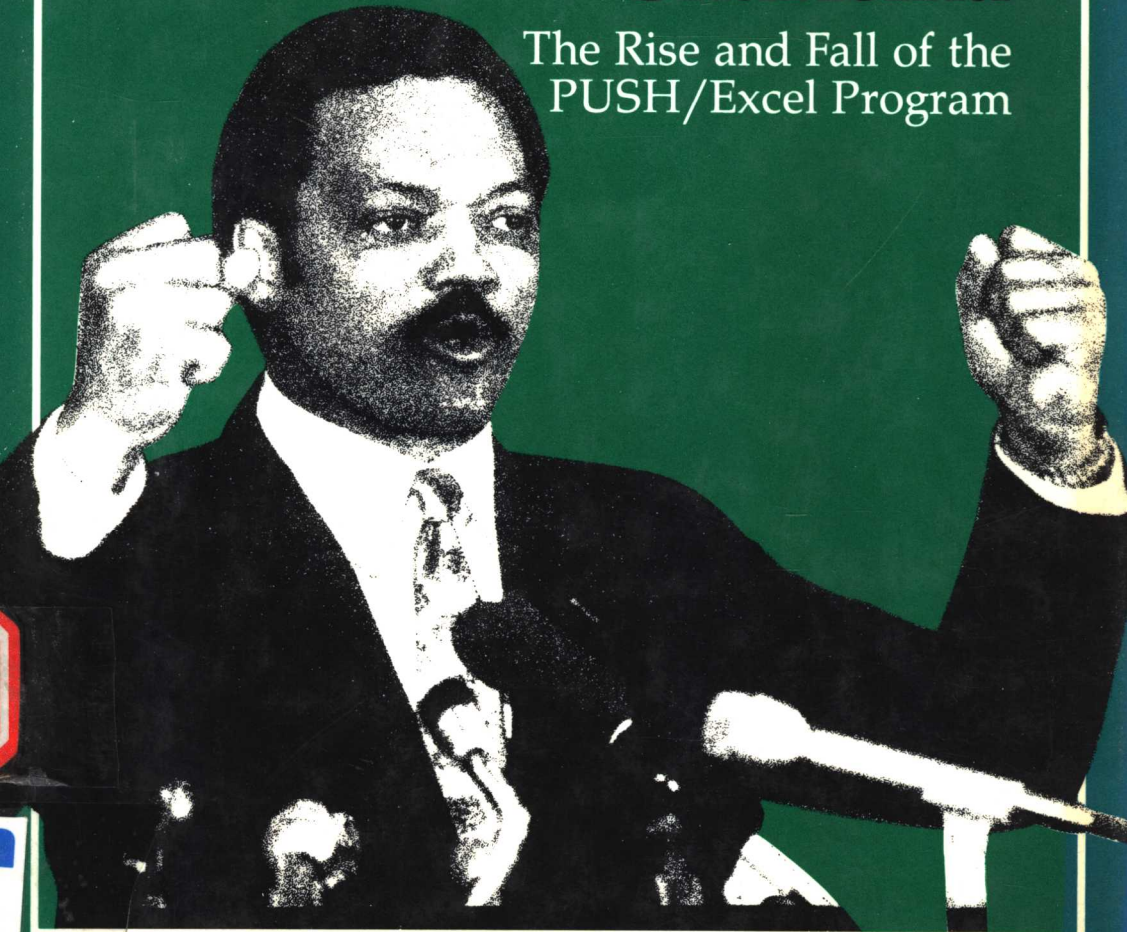


Ernest R. House

Jesse Jackson & the Politics of Charisma

The Rise and Fall of the
PUSH/Excel Program



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the PUSH/Excel Program**

Ernest R. House

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For "Mom," my grandmother Nellie Maud White,
whose acts of spirit and redemption
so affected all our lives

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Preface

On January 15, 1975, the Reverend Jesse Jackson was leading a demonstration around the White House to protest the lack of jobs for black youths. As the demonstrators marched, Jackson was shocked to discover that many of the black youths marching with him were drunk or on drugs, many of them "out of control." Abruptly, he called a halt to the demonstration and sent the marchers home.

Within a few months, Jackson launched a national campaign in the urban high schools of the nation to save the black youths of his country, to get them off drugs and motivate them to work hard, study in school, develop self-discipline, and become successful in American society. A program called PUSH for Excellence, or PUSH/Excel, was an outgrowth of his Operation PUSH organization. Society had no solutions for the black teenagers whom Jackson was trying to help, and his efforts were highly praised, at first, by the media and government officials.

Jackson's moral campaign was highlighted by the mass media in front-page newspaper coverage and prime-time television. "Jesse Jackson's Crusade," the media called it. Within a few months, Jackson had raised funds from private sources to support the effort, and within a few years, at the direct intervention of Hubert Humphrey, who was dying of cancer, he was offered substantial financial support from the federal government. School districts lined up to implement the new program, and government and school officials at all levels, it seemed, were willing to help.

After only three more years of effort, the program was in a shambles; the mass media that had lauded it only a short time before now proclaimed it a failure. Jackson himself was accused of various misdeeds and chastised for his demagoguery and lack of follow-through. Jackson defended himself by asserting that his political enemies had sabotaged the effort. Shortly afterward, he put the PUSH/Excel program behind him and went on to become a candidate for the presidency of the United States. The black youths he had tried to help were in even more desperate trouble than before. What had gone wrong? How could something so promising end

in such failure? Lots of explanations, mostly accusations, were attempted at the time, but they contradicted one another.

In this book I attempt to describe the events and analyze why they occurred. As one might expect, the events are complex, convoluted, and are not simple to grasp. They form a classic case of racial politics American-style, a drama of misunderstandings and mistrust, of accusations and suspicions, of good intentions turned sour, of soaring aspirations, and of equally steep disillusionment.

There were three major actors in this drama—Jesse Jackson himself, the most visible leader of the 25-million-person black minority and possibly the most controversial man in America; the schools, those too-familiar local institutions that are still plagued by the same old problems despite many efforts to make changes; and the federal government, which of course shapes so much of American life. The mass media also played a minor role, as reporters' attempts to reflect the events objectively nevertheless had an influence on the events themselves. I will examine the actions of each of these actors in turn and then of course their interaction; for each of the players has ways of acting that are unknown, and perhaps unknowable, to the others. The dynamics of their interaction is what gave ultimate direction to the course of events that followed.

Ernest R. House

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I would also like to thank those who worked on the original stakeholder evaluation project, including Bob Stake, Carol Weiss, David Cohen, Tony Bryk, and others in and around the University of Illinois, Harvard University, and the Huron Institute, all of whom were good intellectual company. I would also like to thank Norman Gold and his colleagues at the National Institute of Education for conscientiously and courageously funding the metaevaluation, although perhaps the results did not turn out as they may have hoped. Some of the data reported here were derived from that study. Both the government officials and the American Institutes for Research staffers were generous with their time and no doubt irritated with me for judging their evaluation to be misdirected, even while they acknowledged many of the deficiencies I pointed out. Although no one seems to have found workable solutions to these problems, at least there are people who keep trying.

E.R.H.

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Introduction

The story of PUSH/Excel was derived from dozens of interviews with participants and observers as well as an examination of documents of various kinds, including media accounts, official memos and letters, and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) evaluation reports themselves.

Evaluations of major government social programs such as PUSH/Excel are standard practice. Ordinarily, research organizations compete for contracts to conduct evaluations by submitting proposals in response to government Requests for Proposals, which delineate the specific requirements of the evaluation desired. In this case, AIR won the contract to conduct the evaluation of PUSH/Excel. Their four technical evaluation reports will be discussed in detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

Critiques and studies of the evaluations themselves, however, are not common. In this case, federal officials hoped that they had discovered a way of conducting evaluations of highly political programs that would solve some of the problems such evaluations usually encountered. This approach to evaluation was employed initially with two highly political programs—Jackson's PUSH/Excel program and the Cities-in-Schools program, which was a favorite of Rosalynn Carter. To test this approach, the federal officials also contracted for a study of the evaluation itself as it was employed in these two cases. This second contract was won by the Huron Institute of Cambridge, Massachusetts, with our Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation at the University of Illinois as a partner. This is the study that I refer to in this book as the case study of the evaluation, or the metaevaluation, and this is the point at which I became involved in studying the PUSH/Excel program. Our original report, "The Federalization of Jesse Jackson: The Story of PUSH/Excel's Evaluation," was completed in November 1982. It was later summarized in *New Directions for Program Evaluation* (Farrar and House 1983).

With Eleanor Farrar, my colleague on the case study project, I conducted interviews with more than forty people who were involved in PUSH/

Excel. We either tape-recorded the interviews, took notes, or both and summarized the interviews shortly thereafter. The persons, times, and places of the most important of those interviews have been cited in the References.

Even though the data for this book constitutes considerably more information than most accounts of activities surrounding Jesse Jackson, there are important gaps in the information. The major missing piece is a direct interview with Jackson himself, although I have tried repeatedly to obtain one, even to the point of sending him an earlier version of the manuscript for his comments. For reasons not clear to me, he chose to remain silent, other than what he had already said in the media. Perhaps he had had enough of social scientists, or perhaps he was trying to cut his losses, or perhaps he was simply too busy. I don't know.

I do have a letter from Mary Frances Berry, U.S. civil rights commissioner and former president of the PUSH/Excel board, saying that the portrayal of the PUSH/Excel program "does a remarkable job of describing what happened with PUSH/Excel." She did consent to be interviewed and also responded to an earlier version of the manuscript. And there were numerous interviews with all of the other PUSH/Excel principals—only Jackson is missing.

When citing interviews in the text, I have identified the main participants, such as PUSH/Excel and government officials, by name, as these specifics should be part of the program history. Those who played minor roles I have often identified only by position.

The AIR evaluation reports are actually quite thorough in describing the local program themselves. The on-site AIR observers did their jobs well by sending in extensive reports of local program activities and even reported on the politics surrounding some of the programs.

I did not, however, have access to the PUSH/Excel documents internal to the Chicago home office, nor does anyone else, so far as I know. Operation PUSH considers this information to be private. The same is true of the financial records, and what information I have about the internal budgeting problems comes from audits the federal government conducted when the handling of funds became an issue shortly after President Ronald Reagan took office.

I pulled all this information together in what I hoped would be a coherent and readable narrative that would reflect the many viewpoints of the participants. I looked for agreement between observations and observers. Where possible, I tried to include the word-for-word opinions of those who did not agree with my eventual interpretation of events. Certainly, other reasonable interpretations are possible. I also tried to include data and information that my own interpretation could not explain.

While doing research for the case study, I became fascinated by Jesse Jackson and by the larger turn of events as his attempt to reform the public schools and help black teenagers unfolded. I had previously conducted several studies of efforts to make changes in the schools; this one was similar in some ways and quite different in others. After we completed our contractual study for the government and published the results, I tried to make sense of the larger events I had witnessed and had heard about from others. This book is the product of that attempt.

It focuses on the interaction among Jesse Jackson, the public schools, the federal government, the mass media, and racial conflict in America. I must stress that although I think this is as balanced an account as one is likely to obtain of these events—an attempt at social science fairness and impartiality—it is not a totally flattering picture of the participants or institutions involved. Nor does it place the entire blame on any single factor. My analysis points to the complex underlying pattern of race relations in the United States as an ultimate explanation, which I shall elaborate in the latter half of the book. The book is divided into two basic parts—first the story of PUSH/Excel as it happened and then an explanation of why it occurred as it did.



1

The Most Controversial Man in America

All famous men and women have legends woven about them. Some they weave themselves, some their enemies weave, and some are simply exaggerations of characteristics they possess in modest degree writ larger by followers who have a need to cast the stories in particular ways. Thus we have George Washington's cherry tree and Abraham Lincoln's long walk to return a library book. Sometimes it takes decades or even centuries to sort the truth from the fiction. Often we never know for certain whether we have succeeded. These apocryphal stories are even stronger and more difficult to disentangle when the central person is controversial. One must be cautious in interpretation.

And no person in the 1980s has been more controversial than Jesse Jackson. He is revered, feared, and despised by vast numbers of people; few Americans are neutral about him. Partly this is because he has been the most visible leader of the 25-million-person black minority in the United States. Partly it is because of his leadership style. And perhaps it is partly because he himself contains many contradictions in his character, which make him fascinating, just as the United States is one of the most fascinating countries in the world because of its internal contradictions.

During the 1984 presidential campaign the *New York Times* summarized Jackson's public image this way:

Mr. Jackson is perceived by many as a man of energy with a probing mind, a silver tongue and a strong charisma, not just an ability to sway crowds but also personal charm and persuasiveness in one-on-one settings. And he is given credit for drawing attention to the needs of blacks, working to motivate school children and creating new business opportunities for black people.

But he is also seen as an egocentric power seeker who upstages other black leaders and pursues publicity for accomplishments that others achieve with less fanfare. And Operation PUSH, which he founded in Chicago 12 years ago, is seen as poorly administered; questions have been raised about its management of federal money (Joyce 1983).

This fascination with Jackson was more personally revealed in the words of two CBS reporters who followed him throughout his presidential campaign. They introduced their book about his 1984 campaign, *Thunder in America*, this way:

This book is an attempt by two reporters to come to terms with Jesse Louis Jackson. "Thunder," to the United States Secret Service detail which guarded him; "Reverend," to his staff; "one hundred and ninety pounds of intellectual dynamite . . . a bad black dude . . . our Savior," to adoring congregations. And a conniving, grandstanding Elmer Gantry to his detractors. We found him playing all those roles—and more (Faw and Skelton 1986, 1).

Many black Americans looked to Jackson as their national leader, the successor to Martin Luther King, Jr. In national polls Jackson was among the most admired public figures in America, respected by blacks and whites alike, one of the few blacks so honored. When the national media wanted to know what blacks thought about an issue, they invariably turned to Jackson for an opinion. He appeared at the side of presidents and celebrities. Yet at the same time—during the 1984 campaign—he received more threats on his life than all the other presidential candidates combined. The danger surrounding him was so tangible that photographers near him wore bullet-proof vests, and Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic vice presidential candidate, told her children not to stand close to him in public for fear of violence (Faw and Skelton 1986).

It was significant that other prominent black leaders, among them Julian Bond and Mayor Andrew Young of Atlanta, also followers of Martin Luther King, expressed reservations about Jackson's bid for the presidency. There had been conflict between Jackson and the inner circle of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) following King's assassination. Reverend Ralph Abernathy had introduced a book highly critical of Jackson with thinly veiled references: "What is needed today is not *charisma* so much as *character*. We had both in Martin Luther King, but we always knew that the character came first and was the most substantial part of the man. Now perhaps we will have to settle for a little bit less charisma and demand a little more character" (Abernathy 1985, vii). Why has Jackson been so controversial? I will trace some of the reported events that cast him in a controversial light,

events leading to the story of PUSH/Excel. Later I will explore some of the deep-seated reasons for Jackson's image, with PUSH/Excel in the foreground.

Jackson's Early Career

Two biographies of Jackson exist, one by Barbara Reynolds, originally published in 1975 and reissued in 1985, and one by Eddie Stone, published in 1979. The one by Reynolds is substantial and authoritative, based on considerable first-hand interviewing. The tone of her book is critical, seemingly that of a woman who was enthralled with Jackson and what he stood for and then disenchanted. The one by Stone is comparatively slight and noncritical, more of an admiring campaign biography. Both biographies are fascinating reading. Their portrayals of his childhood point clearly to why he has such an intense personal need for leadership, recognition, and respect. Raised as an illegitimate child in a small town, he has always sought the respect he thought lacking, even in his younger years. Furthermore, the early events in Jackson's career indicate why he is so controversial. These issues will all be explored more fully in later chapters. For now, I caution against judging Jackson's controversial background at face value.

In 1965 Martin Luther King was facing difficulties in the demonstrations in Selma, Alabama. Violence had erupted, and he called upon everyone in the civil rights movement to come to Selma to help. Jackson, then a student at the Chicago Theological Seminary, organized half the students there and led them to Alabama. At the height of the demonstrations, King, Abernathy, and the top leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference addressed the demonstrators from the steps of city hall. During a lull Jackson himself—totally unknown and uninvited—climbed the steps and addressed the crowd. The SCLC leaders were appalled at his audacity, but the crowd and media responded enthusiastically and King commended him personally.

Other SCLC leaders were unhappy about Jackson's impertinence. Andrew Young said, "I remember getting a little annoyed because Jesse was giving orders from the steps of Brown chapel and nobody knew who he was" (Reynolds 1975, 54). However, Ralph Abernathy was impressed with the young man, and when Jackson asked for a job, Abernathy convinced Martin Luther King to hire him. So Jackson was given a job organizing black ministers for the SCLC in Chicago.

The next year King decided to begin activities in Chicago to give SCLC a national platform instead of solely a southern base. The usual strategy was to organize through the local black ministers, who would bring their congregations into the effort. However, none of Chicago's

ministers wanted to risk offending Mayor Richard Daley. Jackson took on the task of meeting with ministers one-on-one, and by the time King arrived, he had organized considerable support. Reportedly, King and his staff were met at O'Hare Airport by a limousine driven by Jackson himself. The next day, a mass rally was held at Soldier Field; King was impressed (Reynolds 1975, 65).

After failing to reach an agreement with Daley on open housing, King led demonstration marches into various sections of Chicago, such as Gage Park, Marquette Park, and Cragin, where the protesters encountered violently racist crowds. As SCLC leaders were contemplating what to do next, Jackson appeared on television and announced that they would march into Cicero, regarded as the most racist section of Chicago. That decision had not been made by the SCLC leadership, and Jackson had no authority for making such an announcement. A King staff member said, "The march announcement came one night when the cameras were on him. He couldn't resist saying something sensational that would get his name in the papers" (Reynolds 1975, 65).

Although the SCLC staff was again appalled, King decided to proceed with the march anyhow. Fearing racial violence, Mayor Daley capitulated and signed an open housing agreement, which proved to be worthless because the Chicago authorities never implemented it. King then organized a voter registration drive in Chicago in 1966 geared toward the 1967 mayoral election, but this effort also failed miserably. Daley had the city locked up through the apathy of black voters and the strength of his political machine.

The movement had come up against America's most powerful local machine and had lost. The test case had been a failure, and Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference would never quite recover. They had played ball in the "minor" leagues of the South and had won their share of games. Once they stepped into the huge stadium of the Northern power-brokers, they found themselves leaving town with their tails between their legs (Stone 1979, 70).

There was one man, though, who thought he was ready to play in the major leagues. As the SCLC headed south, it left twenty-five-year-old Jesse Jackson in charge with only a small staff.

Jackson had been running the economic arm of SCLC, called Operation Breadbasket, and he thought that economics was the key to making changes in northern cities. "We are the margin of profit of every major item produced in America from General Motors cars on down to Kellogg's Corn Flakes. If we've got his margin of profit, we've got his genitals,"