

Thanks for 25 years of service

Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
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Has it really been 25 years since the Rev. Jesse Jackson made that powerful and profound speech to the Democratic National Convention? Twenty-five years since our nation stood mesmerized, as the first African American to garner as many votes and have as significant a presence in a major political party's Presidential race spoke in culmination of his effort and electrified all of us.

In 25 years our nation's political landscape has been completely transformed. Jesse Jackson was an African American candidate who newscasters openly asked inane and disrespectful questions like, "What qualifies you to run?"

President Barack Obama was asked some of those same questions during his campaign. But he prevailed, standing on the shoulders of one who shifted the historical tide.

Rev. Jackson did more than simply run for President. He emboldened a generation of African American politicians and would-be politicians to take on the mantle of political leadership.

He emboldened young men and women who were ambivalent about mainstream politics and about their own chances of success with his chant: "I am somebody."

He took on the African American establishment at that time – those in the Democratic Party who were connected to and supportive of former Vice President Walter Mondale. That group of esteemed leaders – Ambassador Andrew Young, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, and so many others – had another vision for the presidency, but they came to appreciate Rev. Jackson's effort.

His presence in the 1984 campaign galvanized millions of voters who may otherwise have sat at the sidelines in the election.

I was there in 1984 as part of the Rainbow Coalition. When I think of those days the memories rush back at me. I ran to be a Jackson delegate and was an alternate. I was the designated Jackson representative who debated a Mondale and Hart representative every morning on a local radio program.

I was a surrogate speaker for Rev. Jackson, and at the same time I was running for local public office (I got whupped) and leading an initiative to remove San Francisco pension funds from companies doing business with South Africa (we prevailed).

I have fond memories of the political friends from those days – Butch Wing, Geraldine Johnson, so many others. It is through Rev. Jackson that I first met the CNN commentator, now friend, Donna Brazile.

My walk down memory lane is not just an opportunity to wallow in nostalgia. My memory tells me that we are so much better off for Rev. Jesse Jackson's run for President. We, the nation, because Rev. Jackson led the shift in our historical context.

Just consider the difference in the African American political landscape before and after 1984. Before, we were tepidly running for a Congressional seat here and there. After, we are running

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for Governor, Senator, and President. Before, Democrats comfortably had just one or two African Americans in a cabinet. We have had as many as four cabinet positions at a time after Jackson. The nation is better off for the Jackson run, and so are the inheritors.

Who are the inheritors? We are the thousands who were directly touched by the Jackson campaign. The delegates, fundraisers, and volunteers who were enlightened, enriched, encouraged, emboldened. We are the ones who have had the opportunity to sit at Rev. Jackson's feet and hear him think aloud and be astounded, again and again, at his brilliance and his courage.

My work today is very much impacted by the many ways the Democratic Party platforms in 1984 and 1988 were enhanced by the input of Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Jackson delegates who were committed to social and economic justice and especially educational equity.

From full funding of Head Start, to the consideration of ways that K-12 education is funded, to the illustration of differences in the quality of education between inner cities and suburbs, to the matter of affirmative action in higher education, Rev. Jackson's advocacy has embraced the notion that education has the power to transform lives.

To the extent that he has used his influence to address and improve educational access and outcomes for African American young people, Rev. Jackson has invested in our nation's future.

I think of Rev. Jackson when I think of Dr. King's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in which he says, "I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere will have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, peace and freedom for their spirits." Audacity means nerve, means the utter nerve to think of, believe in, and embrace the possibility of social and economic justice at home and abroad. Jesse Jackson embodies that audacity. He has chosen not to play small on the world stage but to claim influence and wield it like a mighty sword!

Thank you, Rev. Jesse Jackson, for your phenomenal contribution to our nation and our world, and for your influence in my life and in my work.