

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
BARBARA JORDAN**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Barbara Jordan, professor, public affairs, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM
BARBARA JORDAN**

Teaching by deed as well as by word, Barbara Jordan has dramatically articulated an enduring standard of morality in American politics. Guided by an unshakable faith in the Constitution, she insists that it is the sacred duty of those who hold power to govern ethically and to preserve the rule of law. As the first African American woman elected to the Texas State Senate, her conspicuous abilities led her to the United States Congress, where her brilliant oratory and meticulous judgement earned our lasting respect. She continues her life's work as a teacher, explaining and analyzing complex issues of moral responsibility in politics and imbuing the leaders of tomorrow with the ability to follow her formidable lead.

— Citation by President Clinton in awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Barbara Jordan, August 1994.

Barbara Jordan, who died in Austin on January 17, 1996, at the age of 59, was a member of the faculty of The University of Texas for 17 years. Accepting a professorship in the LBJ School of Public Affairs after three terms in Congress, she brought with her a national reputation as an advocate for the highest standards in public service. The vigor with which she had pursued her electoral career was channeled smoothly into her announced intention to become a “first rate professor.” She succeeded abundantly.

There was little in the immediate background of Barbara Jordan to suggest the contours of her career. Houston's Fifth Ward, where she was born on February 21, 1936, offered scant support for an ambitious African American child—except for a grandfather who believed in her potential. Nonetheless, she graduated with honors from Texas Southern University and subsequently earned an LLB from Boston University. The private practice of law, however, was not to be her career, although respect for the law suffused every aspect of her life. The rule of law, especially as exemplified in the Constitution of the United States, was the bedrock of her public service, her teaching, and her impact on her many students.

Public Service

The raw materials of Barbara Jordan's career tell some of the story: a member of the Texas Senate from 1966 to 1972; the first Black Texan to be elected to Congress, where she served from 1972 to 1978; appointed to various legislative committees at both the state and national levels, notably including the House Judiciary Committee during the Watergate Hearings of 1974 (where television first introduced her to a nationwide audience); the first Black woman to keynote a Democratic convention (1976); post-1979 appointments to an array of panels, boards, and commissions. Too many awards to count, too many honors to list.

The theme that tied together the multiple public service activities of Barbara Jordan was her conviction that government could be a force for good, that public servants operate under a constitutional mandate to implement effectively (and ethically) the public will. The rhetoric with which she defended public life at its best, and the voice that elevated that rhetoric, left indelible traces on her colleagues and on those who heard her on television and radio. Lyndon Johnson understood her impact as early as 1971 when he said, “. . . her reputation as a political leader has exceeded the boundaries of Texas. She is known nationally as a leader who is concerned for the rights, the hopes, the dreams and aspirations of *all* the people.”

In her 1998 biography, *Barbara Jordan: American Hero*, Mary Beth Rogers emphasized that what to many seemed a career of steady success was actually a life punctuated by difficulties. Defeated in her first run for the legislature, encountering blatant racism in the Texas Senate of the 1960s, and somewhat alone in her years in Congress, Barbara Jordan, a very private woman, transcended these and her many physical disabilities without complaint, without self-pity. She understood the game of politics and played it well, explaining to her colleagues and later to her students that a public servant has a “moral imperative to be effective.” Both as an active public servant and as a teacher, she became symbolic of what good public service can mean.

Teaching

It was wholly appropriate that Barbara Jordan should hold the Lyndon B. Johnson Centennial Chair in National Policy at the LBJ School. When she died, she was about to teach, once again, a seminar on “Political Values and Ethics.” A paragraph from the spring 1996 syllabus describing that course indicates its scope.

Under our system of government we choose a representative we tell him/her to govern. This system of selection does not guarantee that the assignment is understood. The citizenry (and frequently the politician as well) is unclear about the assignment and sometimes confuse representation and governing. As the ethical principles are sorted out, this course will focus on the difference between governing and representing and whether the values, choices, and ethics vary with the nature of the assignment.

In short, B. J. (as generations of her students called her) was in the business of training public servants, public administrators, public citizens, and—as she also hoped—holders of high elective offices. To her there was a continuum between a school of public policy and the world into which the graduates of such a school would shortly move. Although her career as a teacher lasted only 17 years, B. J. lived long enough to rejoice in seeing her former students become city managers, state officials, and highly-placed federal employees. Her devotion to teaching was repaid many times over by the continued loyalty of those who were fortunate enough to take her classes—loyalty both to their teacher and to her passionately held convictions.

As a teacher, Barbara Jordan did not cease to operate when she was beyond the Forty Acres. Daughter of a Baptist minister, she used many secular pulpits. Constantly in demand for speeches, conferences, board memberships, and media appearances, she selected the places where she thought she would be most useful—such as becoming the ethics “czar” for a Texas governor or cochairing the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform. There is reason to believe she could have received several high national appointments during her years in Austin, had she encouraged those who respected and admired her.

The Jordan Legacy

Barbara Jordan enjoyed life: she loved barbecue and basketball, could sing “Frankie and Johnnie” with gusto, was fond of money but didn’t like to spend it, had a great talent for friendship, and was a practical joker. These facets of her character, however, were largely unknown to those who looked up to her as mentor and legend. What people heard was her message which, although eloquently varied, steadily emphasized the theme of governance, the essential tie between ethics and democratic effectiveness, and the need for continued support of basic constitutional principles. As the years passed, requests for her presence on platforms, on letterheads, on commissions continued. Public statements, interviews, a coedited book, *The Great Society*, among other things, kept her in the public eye. As an array of illnesses afflicted her and she became wheelchair bound, her mobility was inevitably sharply diminished, but the clarity of her thought—not at all.

When she died one month short of a 60th birthday celebration that she would have (ruefully) enjoyed, Barbara Jordan had, in short, become emblematic—for Americans of all races, and, to a lesser extent, to audiences abroad. Behind her lay the barriers she had surmounted. The images that she had imprinted on so many minds persist, and the sound of her voice proclaiming the value of loyalty in an age of disloyalty—loyalty to country, to the art of politics, to this university, and in essence to all human beings.

After her death, Barbara Jordan’s students created an annual “Barbara Jordan Memorial Forum on Diversity in Public Policy” at the LBJ School. Mary Beth Rogers’ insightful biography and many articles and media features have testified to her enduring importance. She has been the subject of a play, “E Pluribus Unum: Barbara Jordan—One Voice,” written by Deborah Hamilton-Lynne and starring Franchelle Stewart Dorn.

Tributes to Barbara Jordan have ranged from the eulogies at memorial services delivered by President Clinton, Bill Moyers, and others who knew her well, to letters written by men and women, African Americans, Anglos, Hispanics, and others, who knew her only from afar. Their theme remains essentially the same: B. J. was a unique human being who, through her life, changed and bettered the world around her.

But Barbara Jordan herself should have the last word (in fact she would have wanted it). At the Democratic National Convention in 1976 she said:

“This is the great danger that America faces. That we will cease to be one nation and become instead a collection of interest groups: city against suburb, region against region, individual against individual. . . . If that happens, who then will speak for America? . . . who then will speak for the common good?”

This tribute by Professor Elspeth Rostow appeared in somewhat different form in the “1996 Eulogies” of the National Academy of Public Administration, of which Barbara Jordan was a Fellow.

Distributed to the Dean of the LBJ School of Public Affairs, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on October 5, 2000. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>.