

BARBARA JORDAN, CHANGE: FROM WHAT TO WHAT? (1992)

Barbara Jordan, a politician and educator, is often credited with breaking down many barriers of race and gender by becoming the first African American since Reconstruction to be elected to the Texas Senate, the first female African American from the South to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and the first woman and African American to deliver a keynote address to the Democratic National Convention.

Change has become the watchword of this year's electioneering. Candidates contend with each other, arguing, debating which of them is the authentic agent of change. Each jostling acquires substance when we comprehend the public mind.

There appears to be a general apprehension about the future which undermines our confidence in ourselves and each other. The American idea that tomorrow will be better than today has become de-stabilized by a stubborn, sluggish economy. Jobs lost have become permanent unemployment rather than cyclical unemployment. Public policy makers are held in low regard. Mistrust abounds. Given such an environment, is it not understandable that the prevailing issue of this political season is identifying the catalyst for change that is required. I see that catalyst as: the Democratic Party and its nominee for President.

We are not strangers to change. We calmed the national interest in the wake of the Watergate abuses and we, the Democratic Party, can seize this moment. We know what is to be done and how to do it. We have been the monument of change in policies which impact education, human rights, civil rights; economic and social opportunity and the environment. These are policies firmly imbedded in the soul of our party. We will do nothing to erode our stance. However, some things need to change. The Democratic Party is alive and well. It will change in order to fully serve the present and the future. . . .

Change: From What to What? We will change from a party with a reputation of tax and spend to one of investment and growth. A growth economy is a must. We can mend the economy and at the same time sustain and even save our environment. When the economy is growing and we are treating our air, water and soil kindly, all of us prosper. We all benefit from economic expansion. I certainly do not mean the thinly disguised racism and elitism of some kind of trickle-down economics. I mean an economy where a young black woman or man from the Fifth Ward in Houston or south-central Los Angeles, or a young person in the colonies of the lower Rio Grande valley, can attend public schools and learn the skills that will enable her or him to prosper. We must have an economy that does not force the migrant worker's child to miss school in order to earn less than the minimum wage just so the family can have one meal a day. That is the moral bankruptcy that trickle-down economics is all about. We can change the direction of America's economic engine and become proud and competitive again. The American dream . . . is gasping for breath but it is not dead. However, there is no time to waste because the American Dream is slipping away from too many. It is slipping away from too many black and brown mothers and their children; from the homeless of every color and sex; from the immigrants living in communities without water and sewer systems. The American Dream

is slipping away from the workers whose jobs are no longer there because we are better at building war equipment that sits in warehouses than we are at building decent housing; from the workers on indefinite layoffs while their chief executive officers are making bonuses that are more than the worker will take home in 10 or 20 or 30 years.

We need to change the decaying inner cities into places where hope lives. We should answer Rodney King's haunting question, "can we all get along?" with a resounding "YES." We must profoundly change from the deleterious environment of the Eighties, characterized by greed, selfishness, mega-mergers and debt overhang to one characterized by devotion to the public interest and tolerance. And yes, love.

We are one, we Americans, and we reject any intruder who seeks to divide us by race or class. We honor cultural identity. However, separatism is not allowed. Separatism is not the American way. And we should not permit ideas like political correctness to become some fad that could reverse our hard-won achievements in civil rights and human rights. Xenophobia has no place in the Democratic Party. We seek to unite people, not divide them and we reject both white racism and black racism. This party will not tolerate bigotry under any guise. America's strength is rooted in its diversity. Our history bears witness to that statement. E Pluribus Unum was a good motto in the early days of our country and it is a good motto today. From the many, one. It still identifies us—because we are Americans.

We must frankly acknowledge our complicity in the creation of the unconscionable budget deficit and recognize that to seriously address it will put entitlements at risk. The idea of justice between generations mandates such acknowledgment and more. The baby boomers and their progeny have a right to a secure future. We must be willing to sacrifice for growth-provided there is equity in sacrifice. Equity means all will sacrifice-equally. That includes the retiree living on a fixed income, the day laborer, the corporate executive, the college professor, the Member of Congress . . . all means all.

One overdue change already underway is the number of women challenging the councils of political power dominated by white-male policy makers. That horizon is limitless. What we see today is simply a dress rehearsal for the day and time we meet in convention to nominate . . . Madame President. This country can ill afford to continue to function using less than half of its human resources, brain power and kinetic energy. Our 19th century visitor from France, de Tocqueville, observed in his work *Democracy in America*, "If I were asked to what singular substance do I mainly attribute the prosperity and growing strength of the American people, I should reply: To the superiority of their women." The 20th century will not close without our presence being keenly felt.

We must leave this convention with a determination to convince the American people to trust us, the Democrats, to govern again; it is not an easy task, but it is a doable one.

Public apprehension and fears about the future have provided fertile ground for a chorus of cynics. Their refrain is that it makes no difference who is elected President. Advocates of that point of view perpetuate a fraud. It does make a difference who is President. A Democratic President would appoint a Supreme Court justice who would protect liberty not burden it. A Democratic President would promote those policies and programs which help us help ourselves: such as . . . health care and job training.

Character has become an agenda item this political season. A well-reasoned examination of the question of character reveals more emotionalism than fact. James Madison warned us of the perils of acting out of passion rather than reason. When reason prevails, we prevail. As William Allen White, the late editor of the Emporia, Kansas Gazette, said, "Reason never has failed man. Only fear and oppression have made the wrecks in the world."

It is reason and not passion which should guide our decisions. The question persists: Who can best lead this country at this moment in our history?

I close by quoting from Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address to a people longing for change from the despair of the great depression. That was 1933, he said: "In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. Given the ingredients of today's national environment maybe . . . just maybe, we Americans are poised for a second 'Rendezvous with Destiny.'"