

*End of the*  
**RAINBOW**

*Jesse Jackson's appointment as Clinton's envoy to Africa is evidence of his growing stature*

**T**

he Rev. Jesse Jackson finally got a job. On October 10, he was sworn in as the U.S. government's special envoy to Africa. Actually, it's not a real job—the appointment is *pro bono*. But getting paid has never been Jackson's top priority. He's always been more interested in status. The 56-year-old Jackson now has one of the most recognizable faces in the world (other than Michael Jordan, and perhaps Muhammad Ali, no African-American is better known). His appointment as President Clinton's point man for Africa shows that he still wields influence, although some black activists and Africa advocates worry that it will do more to burnish Jackson's reputation than to help the troubled continent.

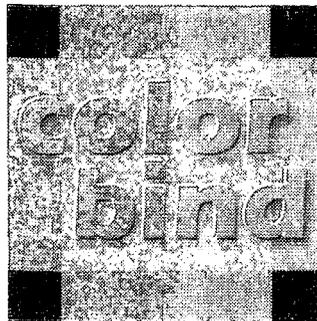
Charges of self-promotion have dogged Jackson throughout his political career. Those criticisms reached a fever-pitch in the late '80s, when the National Rainbow Coalition fell apart after it became clear that Jackson had used the organization for his own political aggrandizement. But this time around, Jackson has the support of most black organizers—even pan-African nationalists who traditionally scorn this country's Africa politics. "Jackson's appointment is a very important one," says Conrad Worrill, chairman of the National Black United Front, a confederation of the country's black nationalist organizations that is usually at odds with Jackson's civil rights tradition. "He'll have the rare opportunity to shine a spotlight on the need for closer connections between Africans and African-Americans. And that link will become increasingly important as we move into the 21st century." The fact that many of his longtime critics are so eager to praise this appointment shows that Jackson's

career has entered a new stage: He is, after three decades of tireless activism, an iconic figure in American politics.

Jackson burst onto the political scene in the early '60s as a civil rights *wunderkind*. After graduating from North Carolina A&T University, where he had been a student leader in the sit-in movement and an organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), he moved to Chicago in 1964 to attend Chicago Theological Seminary. Within a year, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. tapped him to direct the SCLC's Operation Breadbasket in Chicago. In 1971, he broke with the SCLC and created Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity), which soon emerged as a leading force in the black struggle for economic empowerment and educational opportunity.

Brash, articulate and mediagenic, Jackson quickly became popular with journalists looking for clever soundbites. His audacity and his Southern Baptist pedigree made him a hit in the black community as well. By the beginning of the '80s, Jackson was unrivaled as the country's pre-eminent civil rights leader.

In 1984, Jackson violated protocol by vaulting ahead of established black politicians and running for president. He received 3.5 million votes during the primaries, and his campaign registered more than a million voters. Really more of a crusade than a campaign, his presidential run—for a brief historical moment—energized the Democratic left. Jackson parlayed that energy into the formation of the National Rainbow Coalition, the Washington, D.C., group that served as a platform for his second run for president in 1988. That year, he won 7 million votes in the Democratic primaries, coming in



first or second in 46 out of 54 races.

Jackson moved from Chicago to Washington in 1989, where he struggled mightily for statehood as the District's "shadow senator." But he never seemed comfortable so close to the seat of power. "Official Washington is an unreal place and after being there for a while, one begins to feel a little unreal as well," he says. He returned to Chicago in November 1995 to revitalize Operation PUSH and to refocus his efforts on issues of grass-roots organizing.

In the two years since his return, Jackson has been virtually indefatigable. He combined the National Rainbow Coalition and Operation PUSH into the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, merging the former's political focus with the civil rights orientation of the latter. He served a crucial but behind-the-scenes role in the special 1995 election of his son, Jesse Jackson Jr., to Congress from Illinois' Second District. Last March, Jackson opened a Rainbow/PUSH Coalition branch office on Wall Street. He intends to use it to "monitor corporate racism." In July, he traveled to Japan to meet with Mitsubishi Motors Corp. executives about employee discrimination. From there, he went to Indonesia, where he toured the low-wage manufacturing operations that he insists are pulling jobs away from American workers. He threatened boycotts to persuade Mitsubishi and Texaco (which was embarrassed by the release of audio tapes featuring racist remarks by company officials) to make serious efforts to improve opportunities for minorities. Jackson campaigned in Tennessee for state aid for schools and marched alongside AFL-CIO President John Sweeney at a Watsonville, Calif., rally on behalf of strawberry workers. When University of Texas Law School professor Lino Graglia said in September that black and Latino students cannot compete academically with whites because they come from cultures that do not consider failure a disgrace, Jackson helped organize a massive demonstration at the school, where



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he urged a boycott of Graglia's classes. He also helped organize an October protest march in California against the anti-affirmative action Proposition 209.

The Clinton appointment will give Jackson an opportunity to do some more globe-trotting. "I've always wanted to be of service to our country," he told a gathering of journalists at the Chicago headquarters of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition in October. "I want to use my expertise in the area to try and build bridges between the United States and Africa and to expand democracy, human rights and trade development with Africa." He said that it was in the United States' national interest to increase its trade with Africa, a continent of immense natural resources. "After a century of colonial struggles, it's now the period of reconstruction for much of the continent," he said.

This inside-outside *modus operandi* is vintage Jackson. But with the emergence of Jesse Jr. (called "Junior" by friends and foes alike) as an impressive figure in his own right, Jackson Sr. automatically became an "elder statesman." He wears a new *gravitas*, in keeping with this stature.

It was this mantle of respectability that encouraged House Speaker Newt Gingrich to make a move toward rapprochement with Jackson earlier this year. In a political gesture that rocked Washington, Gingrich invited Jackson to be his guest in the House Gallery during the State of the Union address. This raised the hackles of J.C. Watts Jr., the lone black Republican in Congress, who has characterized Jackson, among others, as a "race-hustling poverty pimp." Gingrich came to the defense of the left-leaning Jackson. According to Wesley Pruden, editor of the *Washington Times*, he "all but forced [Watts] to apologize to Jesse Jackson." The brief alliance between Jackson and Gingrich was quickly sundered by a flurry of negative reaction from both men's natural constituencies, but it reinforced Jackson's

increasingly iconic political status.

Jackson still has his many critics. Progressives blame him for squandering a rare opportunity to build on the multi-ethnic, left-populist movement that came together around his two presidential campaigns. "This period, during the vicious reign of Reagan, was one of the most auspicious times for progressive possibilities," says Ron Daniels, executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights and former executive director of the National Rainbow Coalition. "But it soon became clear that Jesse simply wasn't interested in building a grass-roots, nuts-and-bolts political organization. He wanted a vehicle for his own political aspirations."

Meanwhile, black nationalists still blame Jackson for fracturing alliances between the heirs of Malcolm X and those of Martin Luther King. When Jackson launched his initial presidential campaign in 1984, he aligned himself with the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan. That coalition of normally disparate forces energized activists in many sectors of the black community and even made the Nation of Islam drop its traditional stance of political quietism. However, after a few political missteps (Jackson was quoted referring to New York City as "hymietown") and other controversies (Farrakhan was quoted calling Hitler a great man and Judaism a "gutter religion"), the alliance between Jackson and Farrakhan fell apart.

Black conservatives generally concur with Watts' characterization of Jackson as a "poverty pimp." These critics argue that Jackson, and others in the civil rights community, depend on black poverty to justify the remedial programs that they support. "I think the term is perfectly descriptive," says Chicago-based black conservative Lee Walker. "Jackson and company use the myth of widespread black poverty to extract favors from a guilty state, just like pimps use prostitutes to get money from johns."

The truth is that those who search for selfish motives in Jackson's actions may often find what they're looking for. And critics may be right to criticize his itinerancy—both thematic and geographic. But by and large, that's beside the point. As Jackson has often said, he's a "tree shaker not a jelly maker," and as long as trees need shaking, somebody's got to do it. Whether he's driven by ego or principle, Jackson clearly is traveling the progressive road—as a long-distance driver. Various "neos" and "posts" dismiss him as a political anachronism, yet Jackson remains as contemporary as racial and economic polarization. He is peerless in his continuing efforts to close the gaps between races and classes in American society.

"I think as time goes on, we'll realize just how precious Jesse Jackson is," says Ron Walters, director and senior scholar at the African American Leadership Project at the University of Maryland. "He is a man who bestrides black American politics like a colossus and, as the years pass, he still finds new ways of insinuating himself into America's political culture." Walters is right. Historians undoubtedly will refer to this period of black leadership as the Jacksonian era. No other figure, black or white, has had as powerful an effect on America's racial discourse in the last half of the 20th century as this country preacher from Greenville, S.C. And he is not finished yet. ■

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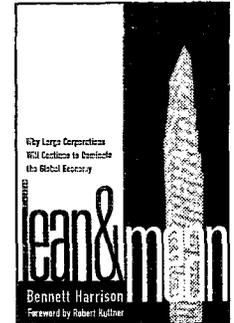
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BY JOEL BLEIFUSS

# Say What?

*To connect with an audience, progressives must reconnect with the left tradition*

**"A**s a practicing populist politician, you not only are trying to deliver your message to bean-sprout eaters but snuff dippers as well. You are talking not just in the salons but in the saloons too." So advised talk radio host Jim Hightower at the opening session of the Media & Democracy Congress in New York, an event that touched off some soul-searching about how the left in the United States communicates its political vision.

Or fails to communicate it. In the November 17 issue of *The Nation*, filmmaker Michael Moore criticized Congress participants, writing, "The left is really in fine form, completely ignoring anything that really matters to the American public." That public, says Moore, while being left on most issues, "see liberals, progressives and lefties as arrogant, self-righteous and dreadfully predictable." Moore concluded, "I say, with all due affection and appreciation for all of you and your causes, get over yourselves, start talking like a real person, then start talking to real people." A good place to meet real people, according to Moore, is at a bowling alley.

Hightower and Moore point out two of the U.S. left's weaknesses: a political alienation that comes from an inability to communicate with a mass audience and an inferiority complex that arises from a tendency to internalize the dominant culture's critique of left politics. Though separate, these two problems are related. It's difficult to present a convincing political argument if you are worried about stepping outside the bounds of acceptable discourse by sounding too "left."

When Moore and Hightower call the left "elitist" or "out-of-touch," they are referring not just to a mode of communication, but to an inter-class conflict that has divided the left since the '60s, when the civil rights and anti-war movements went head-to-head with the labor movement. As Barbara and John Ehrenreich argued in a 1976 essay, "The Professional-Managerial Class," the people who identified themselves as "left-wing" during and after the Vietnam War tended to be middle-class professionals—teachers, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, doctors and managers.

This new grouping, which the Ehrenreichs dubbed the

"professional-managerial class," often found itself at odds with workers. Workers, they argued, "are as likely to be anti-professional-managerial class as they are to be anti-capitalist—if only because people are more likely, in a day-to-day sense, to experience humiliation, harassment, frustration, etc., at the hand of the professional-managerial class than from members of the actual capitalist class." The Ehrenreichs argued that the middle-class left had to "commit itself to uprooting its own ingrained and often subtle attitudes of condescension and elitism."

The left continues to fail to address class issues. As Michael Lind pointed out in the September issue of *Mother Jones*, the question of class has been absent from almost all left discussions of affirmative action. While working class and poor whites are not discriminated against in the same way as ethnic and racial minorities, they are also left out of the system. Lind advocated affirmative action based on "the horizontal line between classes rather than the vertical lines between races." Such a policy would reject "the rainbow strategy in order to concentrate on the interests of working Americans from all backgrounds."

The left should also reconsider a political vision that too often offers as its goal a phalanx of social workers ministering to "the poor." Instead of pandering to liberal guilt, the left should craft a message that appeals to the self-interest of low-income people, the working class and the middle class. Hightower

pushes a straightforward message: "The privileged few are waging an unrelenting, take-no-prisoners, class war against the middle class. It's time we begin to fight back."

To begin with, the left needs to counter the foolish, and pervasive, idea that we have reached the end of history and arrived in a post-partisan era where left and right have no place on the political landscape. As the Italian political scientist Noberto Bobbio argues in *Left & Right: The Significance of Political Distinction*, the concepts of left and right are as valid today as at any time since 1789, when the words were first used in a political context to describe the seating arrangement in the French National Assembly.

Bobbio contends that all left-wing doctrines and move-

