

Politicking In the Fields Of the Lord

JESSE JACKSON: the Man, the Movement, the Myth. By Barbara A. Reynolds. Nelson-Hall. 489 pp. \$9.95

By JOHN H. BRITTON Jr.

FORGET THE FINELY CHISELED, copertone face scowling at you from the dust jacket. Blot out the proper name in the book's title. What the reader has left to ponder in this blistering biography is the tale of a wily, tough, cunning political animal not unlike others of his breed who answer roll call in the Congress and who command governments from executive offices, oval and otherwise.

What this book lays bare, as much as it does the man, is a process—a made-in-America set of principles which, when scrupulously observed, tends to rocket nobodies into household words, catapulting them over the human wreckage which litters their chosen battlefields. To the masters of this craft and this craftiness go the titles of senator, chairman of the board, champion, star, leader. And because most of us are in less of a hurry to get where we're going, we lionize these jet-propelled men for their killer instinct. Or at least we indulge them their excesses, their deviations from our personal norms of conduct and our codes of honor.

"I was born to lead," 33-year-old Jesse Louis Jackson reveals to his biographer. There you have it! Much of what Jesse Jackson is about, and what he thinks he is about, is captured in five words. Indeed,

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few friends or foes are disposed to contradict Jackson's interpretation of his birthright. Fewer still are so foolish as to deny that an uncommon blend of charisma, charm, brilliance and backbone sets him light-years apart from your average mortal. Even author Barbara Reynolds, a Chicago Tribune reporter-columnist, crowns him prince—potentially the most powerful black man in America today. Nevertheless, with this book Reynolds pulls the reverend from his national pulpit, defrocks the clergyman and reveals the ugly warts she reluctantly finds beneath the robes.

Little of what she discovers gives a clue to where this leader of men is taking us. Perhaps she could not guess. Maybe even Jesse Jackson doesn't fully know. What Reynolds has done, though, is to amass from scores of sources an impressive array of data which defines a turbulent era and gives us a glimpse of the quality of Jackson's leadership.

To her credit, Reynolds offers a balanced view of the man. Straining at points to be fair, she fully credits his undisputed victories, even while cautioning that some of his claims of success are pure puffery. She dubs him king of all public speakers in America, though even the reverend himself is seldom audacious enough to rise to preach behind such relative unknowns as powerhouse Baptist clergyman Otis Moss of Cincinnati or firebrand New York evangelist Tom Skinner of local Redskins fame. She credits Jackson's incredible persuasiveness and his organizing genius even as she puzzles over his peculiar loathing for nitty-gritty precinct organizing, the lack of which renders him practically sterile politically



By Larry Morris—The Washington Post

in a city where every inch of turf is organized or organizable. She uncovers a fierce rivalry between Jackson and his brother, Noah Robinson, but also advances as a possible explanation an extraordinary ancestral line. She tiptoes around his attractiveness to females, but also records his wife's serenity and faith in the face of such questions.

The author was clearly a Jackson junkie. Her withdrawal pains are obvious in this volume. Reynolds's narrative is laced with the rhythm, rhyme, and cadence that is vintage Jackson ("paralysis of analysis"). And one can feel the tightening of her stomach muscles when harsh judgments about her subject are compelled by the evidence. She will silence Barbara Reynolds and allow former colleagues and acquaintances of Jesse Jackson to say dreadful truths in their own words whenever a bill of particulars reaches the indictment stage. None of this necessarily weakens the book. It merely hints at the anxieties of an author who appears far from comfortable about sharing with the world the results of her searching examination of a black leader.

Jesse Jackson is a black minister, the self-ordained "Country Preacher" of Chicago who, when pressed to give account of himself, will exclaim: "I've been fighting sin, doctor; wrestling with Pharaoh and fighting sin." From 2000 to 3000 bodies fill pews each week at the rituals staged every Saturday morning by Jackson's creation, People United to Save Humanity (Operation PUSH). He hypnotizes them with his patented chant, "I Am Somebody . . ." They are awed by the parade of black and white politicians, scholars and entertainers who drop in to make



these PUSH meetings the most notable systematic black forum in America today.

Reynolds was thrilled by all of this during the nearly five years she regularly occupied a pew on Saturday mornings. But she became disillusioned at the clay she found on her hero's winged feet. Perhaps she even despaired of her own dependency upon a force outside herself to sustain her commitment to self and race. Somewhere she must have concluded that with this book she would make an effort to sober other blacks, similarly dependent, who, like her, suffer personal paralysis owing to their messiah fixations.

When Martin Luther King Jr. was killed a search for a new deliverer earnest. Some embraced the Ralph David Abernathy, the r. King to succeed to the helm uthern Christian Leadership . Others, including most med it was Jesse Jackson, then an employee and national direc- tion Breadbasket.

now offers evidence that alculatedly manipulated the dvance his name to the top of was not above the fray, she the biting, slashing, cutting began overpowering the gentle and undercutting him right into the obscurity that seems to imprison him.

The author offers the most detailed accounting ever in print of the complicated finances of Operation PUSH, the PUSH Foundation, and of Black Expo, the annual "happening" in Chicago that attracts thousands of spectators, hundreds of business exhibitors and a million dollars worth of black entertainment talent. She offers no hard evidence of malfeasance, but she is critical of the secrecy that cloaks the organization's monetary affairs.

Perhaps the most stunning chapter relates Jackson's movements on the day Dr. King was gunned down in Memphis. Reynolds found former Jackson associates still outraged, including Congressman Andrew Young (D-Ga.) who alleges that Jackson was not the last man to hear King whisper in his dying moments. She quotes these critics as saying that Jackson smeared blood on his shirt in Memphis, boarded a jet to Chicago, appeared before national television cameras and the Chicago City Council to proclaim, in effect, that the blood he bore on his body symbolized the transfer of civil rights leadership from the martyred leader to himself. Meanwhile, most other King disciples were either in Memphis or rushing to get there to mourn their fallen hero and to arrange for his burial. While their

eye were closed in prayer and burning with tears, the Reverend Jesse, they told the author, was wide awake, scheming and getting over.

The author summons other examples of the complex, contradictory Jackson. She carefully records the reverend's observations that Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm lost black support during her presidential foray of 1972 because she allied herself with feminists while assum-

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ing black support would be automatic. "You don't love less the ones you need the most," Jackson lectures. "You don't take your base for granted. You organize your base if you never get with the bird in the bush. You cannot get around being accountable to people that support you."

Elementary, Reverend Jackson, but who is the "Country Preacher" account-

ble to, Reynolds demands. Jackson snaps back: "I am a minister in service of the Lord. I am accountable to Him."

While Reverend Jackson builds his reputation on advocacy for the black and other minority poor, Reynolds demonstrates rather conclusively that the Jackson strategy, at least in Chicago, tends to enrich already wealthy black businessmen, who seem to reap the more visible benefits from PUSH's agreements with adversaries. In some such written agreements, Reynolds notes, the mention of jobs for the poorer masses is secondary, if it is included in the covenant at all. Asked to reconcile his status as mouthpiece for the poor with his relatively sumptuous life-style, Jackson offers no excuses. Of his posh South Shore residence, his luxury automobile, and his tailored wardrobe, he merely observed: "I'm committed to helping myself as well as others."

This book is as much as anything an Emancipation Proclamation for many black journalists who have been bullied for dozens of years by politicians and civil rights leaders of all stripes. Unfavorable public questioning of such men by black reporters, no matter how justified by facts, has been called traitorous at worst, Uncle Tomish at best. Jackson even warned Reynolds not to tell all, arguing: "No white reporter tells it all and neither should you. It is crucial that you understand this." Reynolds has hereby defied the leader, as have dozens of other black journalists who simply don't accept the implication that white reporters are, or should be, their models. They have suffered censure but they have opted for stern professionalism, and it is a safe bet that Reynolds's life in Chicago will be far from routine for a while. Still it is a mark of the Jackson mania for public exposure that he would not resist interviews with author Reynolds when it became plain that a book was in the works and that at least some of it was likely to be critical. (Another Chicago journalist is ghosting a Jackson-sanctioned volume.)

Despite the length of the book and annoying factual slips on dates and events that a wide-awake editor could have corrected, this is a competent first effort. There is also some repetitiveness, which possibly contributes to its length. And while the work is not far removed from the in-depth feature series genre that is a staple of better daily newspapers, it is readable, moving, sympathetic, entertaining and fast-paced. If there is one crucial challenge to black America between its covers, that message has already been spoken by a Mexican revolutionary in the film, "Viva Zapata": "Strong leaders make for a weak people; strong people do not need a strong leader." □