

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Barbara Jordan, Politician, 1936-1996

“‘We the people.’ It’s a very eloquent beginning,” intoned the freshman representative from Texas at hearings to impeach the President of the United States. “But I was not included in that ‘We the People.’ I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake.”¹ Barbara Jordan was the first African American woman from the South to sit in Congress.²



A passionate defender of the Constitution, she broke numerous barriers to achieve political firsts. Barbara grew up in Houston’s neglected Fifth Ward, attended public schools, garnered debate awards, graduated with honors from the all-black Texas Southern University, then enrolled as the first woman law student at Boston University.³

With her LL.B. degree in hand, Barbara opened a law practice in Houston and campaigned for the Kennedy/Johnson ticket of 1960. Her resounding oratory attracted much attention.⁴ After two unsuccessful campaign runs for state representative, she won a 1966 election to the Texas Senate. Barbara was the first African American since Reconstruction and the first woman of her race to hold a seat in that chamber.⁵

Barbara Jordan became an expert in parliamentary procedure. In 1972 the Texas Senate selected her unanimously as president *pro tempore*. She promoted legislation for minimum wage and workers’ compensation. In November 1972, campaigning from a newly drawn Congressional district, she secured a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In the 1974 hearings to impeach President Nixon, Barbara Jordan gave what many consider to be the finest speech of the proceedings, for she articulated the Constitutional principles involved. When the Voting Rights Act of 1965 came up for renewal, Barbara championed expanding its coverage.⁶ She delivered a unifying speech at the 1976 Democratic National Convention, the first African American and first female keynote speaker at a major political convention.⁷

Contending with multiple sclerosis, Barbara Jordan resigned her Congressional post in 1979. For the next 17 years, she was a professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. Even in death she achieved a first—the first African American woman buried in the Texas State Cemetery in Austin.⁸

Quotations

*I’m neither a black politician, nor a woman politician, just a politician. . . . I am here simply because all those people in the 18th District of Texas cannot get on planes and buses and come to Washington to speak for themselves. They have elected me as their spokesman, nothing else, and my only job is to speak for them.*⁹

My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total. I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.—Barbara Jordan at impeachment hearings for President Richard Nixon, 1974¹⁰

What the people want is very simple. They want an America as good as its promise.—Harvard commencement address, 1977¹¹

The majority of the American people still believe that every single individual in this country is entitled to just as much respect, just as much dignity, as every other individual.—University of Texas symposium, 1990¹²

Photo

Still searching.

Endnotes

¹ “Barbara Jordan Statement at the U.S. House Judiciary Impeachment Hearings, July 25, 1974,” *American RadioWorks*, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/bjordan.html> (November 28, 2005).

² “Barbara Jordan,” *TxTell UT Stories*, text provided by LBJ School of Public Affairs, <http://xtell.lib.utexas.edu/stories/j0001-full.html> (April 7, 2005).

³ First woman law enrollee, from Ann Fears Crawford and Crystal Sasse Ragsdale, *Women in Texas: Their Lives, Their Experiences, Their Accomplishments* (Austin: State House Press, 1992), p. 322. Other sources for biographical information in this article are “Barbara Jordan,”

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TxTell UT Stories, online; Mark Odintz, "Barbara Jordan," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/JJ/fjoas.html> (March 9, 2005); "Barbara Jordan," *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Jordan (November 28, 2005); and "Barbara Jordan was the first Black woman to serve in the U.S. Congress from the South," *BeeJae's Little Piece of Cyberspace*, <http://www.beejae.com/bjordan.htm> (April 7, 2005).

⁴Crawford and Ragsdale, *Women in Texas*, p. 322.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 324; and "Barbara Jordan," *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, online.

⁶Crawford and Ragsdale, *Women in Texas*, p. 328; and "Barbara Jordan was the first Black woman to serve...", *BeeJae's Little Piece*, online.

⁷"Barbara Jordan," *TxTell UT Stories*, online; and "Barbara Jordan was the first Black woman to serve...", *BeeJae's Little Piece*, online.

⁸"Barbara Jordan," *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, online.

⁹Barbara Jordan, quoted in Crawford and Ragsdale, *Women in Texas*, pp. 327-28.

¹⁰"Barbara Jordan Statement at the U.S. House Judiciary Impeachment Hearings," online.

¹¹Quoted in "Barbara Jordan," *Teacher Vision*, <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/page/4593.html> (November 29, 2005).

¹²Quoted in "About Barbara Jordan," *The Barbara Jordan National Forum on Public Policy*, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/barbarajordanforum/aboutbj_quotes.htm (November 29, 2005).