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Barbara Jordan Dies at 59; Her Voice Stirred the Nation

By Francis X. Clines

Jan. 18, 1996


The New York Times

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Barbara Jordan, the black Congresswoman and scholar who stirred the nation with her Churchillian denunciations of the Watergate abuses of President Richard M. Nixon, died today in her home state of Texas at the age of 59.

Afflicted with multiple sclerosis, Ms. Jordan died from viral pneumonia as a complication of leukemia, according to officials of the University of Texas in Austin, where she taught.

Ms. Jordan, the first black elected to Congress from Texas after Reconstruction, retired from the House in 1979 after three terms to teach political ethics at the university's Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, never losing her potent talent for public speaking even from the confines of a wheelchair.

Most recently, her rich, impassioned voice was heard once more in Congress when, as chairwoman of the Commission on Immigration Reform, she spoke out last year against a proposal to deny automatic citizenship to the children of illegal immigrants born in this country. "To deny birthright citizenship would derail this engine of American liberty," she warned with the same eloquence that mesmerized her American audience on July 25, 1974, when Representative Jordan argued for the impeachment of President Nixon.

Ms. Jordan, whom her students recalled as never being without a copy of the Constitution in her purse, rooted that Watergate speech in her faith in the Constitution's promise and in her personal history as a child of the Jim Crow South.

"I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake," she declared, catching the nation's attention with measured, sepulchral oratory from her seat on the House Judiciary Committee. "But through the process of amendment, interpretation and court decision I have finally been included in 'We, the people.' "

Then, with a smoldering glance across the proceedings of the historic Constitutional crisis, Ms. Jordan added, "My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total, and I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution."

Ms. Jordan was one of American politics' pioneer black women. In 1966, she was elected as the first black state Senator in Texas, and went on to be the first woman and first black elected to Congress from Texas. In 1976, she was the first black woman to deliver a keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, riveting her audience on national television as she spoke magisterially from the stage at New York's Madison Square Garden.

"All blacks are militant in their guts," she told an interviewer during her first Congressional campaign. "But militancy is expressed in different ways."

As a model of the Democratic politician from the New South, Ms. Jordan was less an angry or confrontational liberal than an imposing master of the process and its details. A consummate politician from her earliest days in the Texas Legislature, Ms. Jordan won a seat on the House Judiciary Committee though only a freshman by importuning her political mentor and friend, former President Lyndon B. Johnson, to pull some strings.

"She proved that black is beautiful before we knew what it meant," Mr. Johnson said of her. His widow, Lady Bird Johnson, led Texans in mourning their native daughter. "I feel a stabbing sense of loss at the passing of a good friend," Mrs. Johnson said today.

Ms. Jordan's political prowess saw her ascend to the post of Speaker pro tem in the Texas Senate six years after having arrived there as a political oddity and an outcast.

The youngest of three sisters, Barbara Charline Jordan was born on Feb. 21, 1936, into the poverty of Houston's Fourth Ward. She attended Houston's segregated public schools and graduated magna cum laude with debating honors from the all-black Texas Southern University. Her father, Benjamin, a Baptist minister, moonlighted as a warehouse clerk to help her pay for college, where her scholarship and assertiveness were honed.

As leader of the debating team, Ms. Jordan, known as B. J. to her friends, later proudly recalled maneuvering the Harvard team to a draw. "When an all-black team ties Harvard, it wins," she said.

Ms. Jordan received a law degree in 1959 from Boston University and was soon at practice from her family's dining-room table. Eventually, she had a second-story office above a print shop near her family's simple frame house.

"I never wanted to be run of the mill," she told Molly Ivins, the Texas writer who was a friend since 1969 and likened interviewing Ms. Jordan to "a bit like grilling God" because of the care, scholarship and booming authority of her speech.

"We were poor," Ms. Jordan said of her strict but loving upbringing. "But so was everyone around us, so we did not notice it."

When Miss Jordan was 11, she quit her piano lessons -- a defiant act that angered her father. He told her that the only good jobs for black women were in teaching music or in performing, and asked her what she intended to do if she could not play the piano. "I don't know," she recalled telling him, "but I'll manage somehow."

As a Congressional newcomer, Ms. Jordan served notice that she had received 80 percent of the vote and would therefore have far broader interests than the Black Caucus agenda, and would hardly be a "female chauvinist."

"You know, Barbara wasn't really that concerned about the guilt or innocence of Nixon," said Representative Charles B. Rangel, the Manhattan Democrat who served with Ms. Jordan on the impeachment hearings. "She was most concerned that the Constitution not be distorted for political reasons."

Some of Ms. Jordan's earliest politicking was as a young lawyer when she directed one of Houston's first voter drives in support of the Kennedy-Johnson ticket in 1960. She lost her first two bids for elective office in rough-and-tumble, racism-tinged bouts. But she succeeded when state legislative districts were finally redrawn and she became the first black of either sex to be elected to the Texas Senate since 1883.

Even amid the political turmoil of 1974, when Congresswoman Jordan contended that the Watergate conspirings had put the nation "on the edge of repression and tyranny," the outspoken Texan still led with her optimism. During that summer of the Watergate crisis, she took care to visit the graduates of Howard University and urge them: "Reaffirm what ought to be. Get back to the truth; that's old, but get back to it. Get back to what's honest; tell government to do that. Affirm the civil liberties of the people of this country. Do that."

Ms. Jordan is survived by her mother, Arylenne; two sisters, Bennie Creswell and Rose Mary McGowan, and a brother-in-law, John McGowan, all of Houston.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the National edition with the headline: Barbara Jordan Dies at 59; Her Voice Stirred the Nation