

The American Dream:

Congresswoman Shirley St. Hill Chisholm, the Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson and U. S. Senator Barack Hussein Obama

James Weldon Hill
Attorney (Retired)
U.S.A.

What is the “American Dream”?

To United States Senator Barack Hussein Obama, the “American Dream” is being elected President of the United States of America (U.S.A.) and thus be able to make the changes needed for the good of the country.

In February 2007, Senator Obama announced his candidacy for the 2008 Democratic nomination for the Presidency. He became the third African-American to seek this nomination.

This article contains information about the three persons of African Descent who have had the audacity to dream of (and even seek) the highest political office in the land; they are also the first three to have believed enough in themselves and their possibilities, and worked diligently and unceasingly enough, against all odds, to achieve it.

One must remember this is the same nation in which only 143 years ago the forebears of these three individuals were slaves; and that following their release from bondage they continued to exist under psychological slavery—apartheid or Jim Crow laws—, forms of institutional racism. Yet, these people believed that the time had come for them to throw off the shackles of oppression, and unjust and unequal treatment, and assume leadership role in the development of

a humane society—one in which the love and respect of all was the norm and not the exception.

Two of them saw their goal, believed in it, and as a result, sought the Office of the Presidency. Although they were not successful in achieving that goal, they cleared the way for the latest African-American candidate, Senator Obama, to step forward and attempt to bring about substantial change in the U.S. and unite the nation.

The first African-American to seek the Presidency was:

Congresswoman Shirley St. Hill Chisholm—“Strength In Unity”

Congresswoman Shirley St. Hill Chisholm announced her candidacy for the Democratic Nomination for the Presidency on January 25, 1972. She was not only the first woman but also the first African-American to do so.

Chisholm was born on November 30, 1924 in Brooklyn, New York, the daughter of Charles and Ruby St. Hill. Her father was from British Guiana; her mother from Barbados. In 1927, Shirley was sent to Barbados to live with her maternal grandmother; while there she would receive an excellent education under the British School system. She later credited this education with providing her with a strong academic

background. Subsequently, she enrolled in Brooklyn College, where she majored in sociology. She encountered and fought against racism at this college. When black students were denied admittance to a white social club, Chisholm formed her own social club—but with no racial restrictions. She graduated with honors, in 1946, and subsequently attended Columbia University, where she received her Master's degree in childhood education.

In 1949, she married Conrad Chisholm, a Jamaican who worked as a private investigator. They participated in local politics and helped form the Bedford-Stuyvesant Political League. In addition to participating in politics, Shirley Chisholm worked in the field of day care until 1959. In 1960, she started the Unity Democratic Club, which served as the catalyst in mobilizing black and Hispanic voters. She realized that in unity there is strength.

In 1964, she ran for and was elected to serve in the New York State Assembly, where she served from 1964 to 1968. Her campaign slogan was “Fighting Shirley Chisholm - Unbought and Unbossed.”

In 1968, Chisholm became the first African-American woman elected to the United States Congress, where she served with distinction on a number of committees, including but not limited to, the Veterans Affairs Committee and the Education & Labor Committee.

On January 25, 1972, she tried to follow her dream; Chisholm announced her candidacy for the Presidency. She stood before the cameras and in the beginning of her speech said:

“I stand before you today as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency of the United States. I am not the



candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman, and I am equally proud of this. I am not the candidate for any political bosses or special interests. I am the candidate of the people.”

In 1972, the Democratic National Convention met in Miami, Florida. This was the first major convention in which a woman was considered for the presidential nomination. There were a total of thirteen candidates seeking the Nomination. The candidates with the highest number of delegate votes were: George McGovern, Senator, South Dakota, with 1,729 votes (57.37%); Henry M. Jackson, Senator, State of Washington, with 525 votes (17.42%); George Wallace, Governor, Alabama, with 382 votes (12.67%); and, Shirley Chisholm, New York Congresswoman, with 162 votes (5.04%).

Although Chisholm did not win the 1972 Democratic Nomination, she paved the way for others to follow. She continued to serve in the House of Representatives until 1982, at which time she retired from politics.

Chisholm received many honorary degrees and awards, including Alumna of the Year, from Brooklyn College; Key Woman of the Year; Outstanding Work in the Field of



Child Welfare; and Woman of Achievement. She was a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. In 1993, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. She authored two books: *Unbought and Unbossed* (1970); and *The Good Fight* (1973).

Congresswoman Shirley St. Hill Chisholm died on January 1, 2005.

The second African-American to seek the Presidency was:

The Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson—"Keep Hope Alive."

In 1984, the Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson, a Civil Rights Activist and Baptist Minister, announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency. He became the second African-American to do so.

Considered a fringe candidate by many, he nevertheless surprised those pundits when he received 3.5 million votes and won 5 primaries and caucuses, including Louisiana, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, Virginia, and one of two separate contests in Mississippi (the Party rules for delegate selection were changed in the middle of the election year). He gained 21% of the popular vote but only 8% of the delegates. He further surprised many when he took third place behind Colorado Senator Gary Hart

and former Vice President Walter Mondale, who eventually won the nomination.

In 1988, Jackson again announced himself as a candidate for the Democratic nomination. His efforts and successes in his 1984 campaign enabled him to obtain additional funds to better organize and run his 1988 campaign. Once again Jackson surprised the pundits by capturing 6.9 million votes and winning 11 contests—7 primaries (in Alabama, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Puerto Rico and Virginia), and 4 caucuses, namely, in Delaware, Michigan, South Carolina and Vermont. His March victories included Alaska's caucuses and Texas's local conventions. Notwithstanding, he lost the Texas primary. After winning 55% of the vote in the Michigan Democratic caucus, Jackson was briefly considered the frontrunner for the nomination for having surpassed all the other candidates in total number of pledged delegates. However, Michael Dukakis, then Governor of Massachusetts, subsequently received 2,687 votes. The final tally for Jackson was 1,218 votes, placing him in second place in the race; it was Dukakis who had won the Democratic nomination for the Presidency.

Jackson was born on October 8, 1941, in Greenville, South Carolina. His mother, Helen Burns, married Charles Henry Jackson, who subsequently adopted Jesse, who took his stepfather's surname.

He attended Sterling High School, a segregated school in Greenville, S. C., and later graduated from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College in Greensboro, North Carolina. Afterward, he attended the Chicago Theological Seminary with the intention of becoming a minister. However, he left the Seminary in 1966 to devote his efforts to the Civil Rights

Movement. He protested the local, whites-only library system, and then later led demonstrations against segregated restaurants, theaters, and hotels. He was later ordained a Baptist Minister, in 1968, and was awarded an honorary theological doctorate degree from the Seminary in 1990.

Jackson participated in the 1965 Civil Rights marches from Selma, Alabama, to

Montgomery, Alabama. In 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. selected Jackson to head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Operation Breadbasket in Chicago, and in 1967 promoted him to be its National Director.

In 1971, Jackson founded "Operation Push." The acronym P - U - S - H stands for "People United to Serve Humanity." His commitment to his "National Rainbow Coalition" strengthened his compassion for the poor, the marginalized, and the downtrodden.

During the 1980s, Jackson spent a great deal of his time in international affairs. For example, the U.S.A. sent Lt. Robert Goodman, U. S. Navy, on a mission to bomb Syrian positions in Lebanon. The Syrians, however, shot Goodman down and held him as a prisoner of war. As a result, Jackson traveled to Syria in 1983, in an effort to seek the release of Lt. Goodman. After his personal appeal to President Hafez al-Assad of Syria, the President authorized the release of Lt. Goodman.

In June 1984, President Fidel Castro invited Jackson to Cuba. While there, he negotiated the release of twenty-two Americans held in Cuba.

Jackson traveled to Kenya, Africa, in 1997, to meet with President Daniel Arap Moi. As President William Clinton's Special Envoy, he was there to promote free and fair elections.

In April of 1999, during the Kosovo War, Jackson traveled to Belgrade. He went there to negotiate the release of three U.S. prisoners of war who had been captured on the Macedonia border while patrolling with a U.N. peacekeeping unit. Jackson met with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, and following extensive negotiations, President Milosevic authorized the release of the three men.

Jackson met with Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela, in August 2005, at which time he apologized and condemned as immoral the statement made by Pat Robertson, namely, that Chavez should be assassinated. Jackson later addressed the Venezuelan Parliament. He determined that there was no evidence that Venezuela posed a threat to the U. S. Additionally, while in Venezuela Jackson also met with representatives from Afro-Venezuelan and indigenous communities.

As he passed the political torch to his son, Jesse Jr., a Congressman from the State of Illinois, Jackson continued in leadership roles championing a host of causes.

Marrying Jacqueline Lavinia Brown in 1962, Jackson's family consists of three sons and three daughters.

The third African-American to seek the Presidency is:

United States Senator Barack Hussein Obama—"Change"

As I stated at the outset, Senator Barack Hussein Obama announced his candidacy for the 2008 Democratic Nomination in February 2007.

Obama was born August 4, 1961, in Honolulu, Hawaii, to Barack, Sr. and S. Ann Dunham Obama. His father was from Kenya, Africa; his mother from Kansas, U.S.A. They met as students at the University of Hawaii, in Manoa, Hawaii. His father later attended Harvard University to pursue his Ph.D.,

dying in 1982. Obama's mother, who had later married Lolo Soetoro, an Indonesian and a student at the University of Hawaii, died in 1995.

His name, 'Barack,' means "blessed" in Swahili. In 1983 Obama graduated from Columbia University in New York City, in New York City, where he majored in Political Science. Later he studied law at Harvard University. While at Harvard, he was elected president of the Harvard Law Review, a very prestigious position. Obama received his J.D. Law Degree magna cum laude in 1991.

While working at the Chicago law firm of Sidley and Austin, Obama met Michelle Robinson, in 1989. Michelle graduated from Harvard Law School receiving her J.D. Law Degree in 1988. She worked at the same law firm as an associate in the area of marketing intellectual property. Michelle left the corporate law world to pursue her career in public service. She served as Assistant to the Mayor and then as Assistant Commissioner of Planning and Development for the City of Chicago. Later, she was appointed Vice-President of Community and External Affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center. She also managed the business diversity program.

Barack and Michelle married in 1992. They have two daughters, Malia and Sasha. The family attends Trinity United Church of Christ.

As a community organizer in Chicago, Obama aggressively and successfully organized voter registration in an effort to get Bill Clinton elected President and Carol Moseley Braun elected Senator. He subsequently became Senior Lecturer of Constitutional Law at the University of Chicago, serving as a professor at the University until his election to the United States Senate.



Obama was elected to the Illinois State Senate in 1996. Because the Democrats had regained control of the chamber, Barack served as chairman of the Public

Health and Welfare Committee and worked for legislation that would cover residents who could not afford health insurance. He also helped author a state earned income tax credit which provided benefits to the working poor. Also, he spoke up for "gay and lesbians advocacy groups" and successfully helped pass bills to increase funding for AIDS prevention and care programs.

Obama lost the 2000 Democratic primary for United States Congressman from Illinois against incumbent Representative Bobby Rush. Following his defeat, Barack rededicated his efforts as a State Senator, focusing on legislation to reform the death penalty laws. He also took an active role in pushing through legislation that would force insurance companies to cover routine mammograms.

Obama's 2004 opponent for the U. S. Senate was Alan Keyes, a black conservative Republican. During the campaign, Keyes called Obama's position regarding abortion "the slave-holder's position"; further, it is alleged that Keyes said: "that Jesus would not vote for Barack". Undoubtedly, Jesus did not agree with Mr. Keyes since Obama

received 70% of the popular vote, compared to Keyes's 27%.

Obama was sworn in as United States Senator from Illinois on January 5, 2005. He has served on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee; Foreign Relations Committee and the Veterans Affairs Committee.

In March, 2005, Obama announced his first proposed Senate bill, the Higher Education Opportunity through Pell Grant Expansion Act of 2005 (HOPE ACT), which aims to raise the maximum amount of Pell grant awards to help college students pay their tuition. In the April 18, 2005 issue of TIME Magazine Obama was listed as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

In order to become a Democratic nominee for President, a candidate has to be nominated by a majority of delegates attending

the Democratic National Convention slated for August 2008 in Denver, Colorado. Further, a candidate has to win a simple majority of 2,025 delegates out of a total of 4,049 delegates to win the 2008 nomination. The number, however, could change if delegates leave office, leave the party, cannot make it to the convention, or if the national party changes what states to include in the final count.

As of Friday, March 14, 2008, Obama has received a total of 1,529 delegates. His opponent, Senator Hillary R. Clinton, New York, has received a total of 1,417 delegates.

So far, Obama is the frontrunner, pending the results from the several remaining states in which he must compete before the Democratic convention.

Will he reach "The American Dream"?

References

- 1- Ploski, Henry A. and Ernest Kaiser. *The Negro Almanac* (The Bellwether Co., 1971): 326.
- 2- Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Africana, The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (Boston: Harvard University, 1999): 424.
- 3- "Shirley Chisholm, profile of the African American woman who was candidate for the Democratic Presidential Nomination." <http://nh.essortment.com/shirleychisholm_ruol.htm>
- 4- Freeman, Jo. "Shirley Chisholm's 1972 Presidential Campaign." <<http://www.jofreeman.com/polhistory/chisholm.htm>>
- 5- Johnson Lewis, Jone. "Shirley Chisholm Quotes." <<http://womenshistory.about.com/od/quotes/a/shirley-chisholm.htm?p=1>>
- 6- Ploski, Henry A. et al. *Op. Cit.* 225
- 7- Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: 1018
- 8- "Jackson, Jesse, Sr." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesse_Jackson>
- 9- Apple, R. W., Jr. "Jackson is seen as winning a solid place in history." *The New York Times* (1988-04-29). Retrieved on 2008-01-05).
- 10- "Meet the Candidate" <http://www.barackobama.com/learn/meet_barack.php>
- 11- "Biography" <<http://www.biography.com/search/article.do?id=12782369&page=print>>
- 12- "2008 Election Coverage" <<http://content.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/results-all.aspx>>
- 13- "CNN Politics" <<http://cnn-politics.com/>>