

CHAPTER
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Section 2

AMERICAN LIVES **Barbara Jordan,**
Brilliant Speaker, Able Legislator

"We are a people in search of a national community, attempting to fulfill our national purpose, to create and sustain a society in which all of us are equal."
—Barbara Jordan, keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention (1976)

Barbara Jordan (1936–1996) impressed millions of Americans with the eloquence of her words. She impressed colleagues inside the legislatures where she served with her ability to get things done.

At age 16, Jordan won a national contest in speechmaking. She later led her college debating team to a number of championships. After graduating from law school, she returned to Texas and opened a private practice. Soon, Jordan became involved in politics. In 1960, she organized a get-out-the-vote drive that won an unprecedented 80-percent turnout among black voters in her home county. She twice lost races for the Texas House of Representatives. In 1966, however, she won election to the Texas Senate—the first African American elected since 1883 and the first woman ever.

In the Senate, Jordan quickly won admiration for her intelligence and her political skills. She did not want to change the Senate's ways, she said, but to get things done. She pushed the Senate to pass new laws protecting the environment, setting a minimum wage, and fighting job discrimination. In her six years in the Senate, half the bills she introduced became law.

In 1972, Jordan won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Two years later, she rose to national attention. She was part of the Judiciary Committee that debated whether to impeach President Richard Nixon for his involvement in the cover-up of the Watergate affair. Jordan's speech—televised live across the nation—was powerful. She pointed out that as an African-American woman she had not originally been "included" in the Constitution. Now, she said, she was included. Then she vowed, "I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator in . . . the destruction of the Constitution."

Her speechmaking ability brought her fame again two years later. Her keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention electrified the crowd. Many called for her to be named as the party's vice-presidential candidate. Later that year,

a magazine surveyed Americans to find who they would most like to see as the first woman president. Jordan's name topped the list.

Jordan transferred her success in the Texas legislature to the national Congress. She worked for education and the environment, racial justice, and economic opportunity. Many people were dismayed in 1979 when she retired from the House. She became a teacher at the University of Texas, where her courses in policy and political ethics were always in demand.

Though Jordan no longer held elected office, she continued to speak out on issues that she cared about. She helped start a group that backed liberal causes. She served as a special advisor to the governor of Texas on ethics in government and chaired a presidential commission that studied immigration.

Jordan suffered many illnesses in her later years, but the magic and power of her voice continued. Speaking from a wheelchair, she brought the crowd to its feet at the Democrats' 1992 convention. In 1994 she testified in Congress about a new immigration law. "I would be the last person to claim that our nation is perfect," she said. "but we have a kind of perfection in us because our founding principle is universal—that we are all created equal regardless of race, religion, or national ancestry." That same year Jordan received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Questions

1. What did Jordan mean by saying that our "national purpose" was to "create and sustain a society in which all of us are equal"?
2. Was Jordan an effective lawmaker? Explain your answer.
3. Why did Jordan say, in 1974, that she would not allow the Constitution to be destroyed?