

Remembering the antiwar legacy of Rev. Jesse Jackson

The Grayzone's Max Blumenthal and Aaron Mate look back at the history of Rev. Jesse Jackson as a diplomat and crusader for peace who negotiated the release of hostages while campaigning against the US embargo of Cuba, Washington's support for apartheid South Africa, and in favor of Palestinian statehood when doing so was practically forbidden. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

#Max

A lot of news today. We learned that Jesse Jackson died at age 84. And we both memorialized him in ways that I think were different from how he's being remembered by the Democratic political elite—the party leadership, the leadership of the party that was a vehicle for his ambitions, especially Barack Obama. But yeah, Aaron, any words on Jesse Jackson? Any thoughts on his legacy today?

#Guest

His legacy is so vast. He got his start working under Dr. King, and then after Dr. King's assassination, he emerged as a leader in his own right, inspiring people with his message. You know, “I am somebody”—an amazing speaker who inspired so many people. And then, of course, he could have, just like Dr. King, stayed in his lane of civil rights and coasted off that, earning liberal praise as Dr. King did. But instead, just like Dr. King, he chose to highlight issues of militarism and class, and he never, ever abandoned that. He was so influential. I mean, we focus so much here on Palestine, the moral issue of our time.

And in terms of national figures who helped put Palestine on the map in the U.S., I don't think there's anyone who tops Jesse Jackson. Back in the 1980s, when he was running for president as a Democratic candidate, he insisted on centering Palestinian self-determination. Nobody was doing that back then at his level. And despite all the attacks on him coming from the Zionist lobby, he never caved. On so many issues, when he could have caved to win more acceptance from the mainstream, from the establishment, he never, ever did. And I know you have some personal involvement and experience with him on this as well, especially when it comes to fighting the Trump administration's coup attempt in Venezuela.

#Max

Yeah. Jesse Jackson—actually, I grew up in Washington, so I would see him around all the time. There are probably lots of pictures of me as a kid floating around with Jesse Jackson, because you'd always see him showing up somewhere, and then you'd run and take a picture with him, and he would stop and talk to everybody. The last time I saw him in public was May 15, 2019, outside the Venezuelan embassy, when it was about to be raided by the cops. He broke the gusano siege of the embassy, which was what the Trump administration was trying to seize on behalf of Juan Guaidó's fake government. He had Parkinson's—he'd been afflicted with it for several years—so he wasn't really appearing in public that much.

The Black Alliance for Peace and Ajamu Baraka brought him out there. And later that day, Anya had just come out of the embassy after, I think, two weeks of being under siege there. She had lunch with Jesse—he invited her—and he really took this personally. It was kind of Jesse Jackson's last stand, and he took a physical risk. He and the Black Alliance for Peace were physically attacked by violent right-wing Venezuelan lunatics outside the embassy, but they managed to get a bag of food and supplies in. Let's take a look at that. I think it really highlights what makes him different from so many other Democrats and members of the misleadership class. There's Kevin Zeese, my good friend, who has also left us. He's handing it back, basically.

They weren't letting anyone get close to the embassy, but when Jesse Jackson showed up, the Black D.C. cops just kind of stood aside—they weren't going to stop him. That really shocked the Trump administration and Juan Guaidó's fake government. It's why there was a military-style raid about two days later, taking out the last four embassy defenders, including the late, great Kevin Zeese. Jesse Jackson had no incentive to do this. There was no reason for him to do it except that he believed in it. He had spoken at the funeral of President Hugo Chávez in Caracas, opposed the criminal U.S. embargo on Venezuela, and led grassroots opposition to apartheid South Africa. As you said, Aaron, he helped put Palestine on the map within the Democratic Party by recognizing the PLO.

#Speaker 04

Foreign policy is in shambles. We hope our government will seek wisdom and convene the United Nations.

#Max

And here, he's very weak at this point.

#Speaker 04

And reconciling forces in Venezuela, not overthrowing forces in Venezuela. Venezuela is our neighbor in this hemisphere. And I stand with the coalition and the peace activists who are fighting to end the war in Venezuela.

#Max

And he paid a heavy price for being anti-war within the Democratic Party. Here's a security guard taking a selfie with Jesse Jackson. He really commanded respect, and you can see that he struggles to walk. This was in 2019.

#Guest

And he's not just breaking a blockade—a physical blockade of the embassy—he's also breaking the blockade among prominent Democrats. There's Sam Hussein. He's breaking the blockade of basically being silent on Trump's coup. I remember this at the time, and I remember, you know, Max, you went to Congress and were trying to get Democrats to speak out on Trump's coup attempt in Venezuela, trying to install Juan Guaidó. That's when AOC, for example, famously said, "I'll defer to Democratic Party leadership on this."

And the Democratic Party leadership was deferring to Donald Trump. They were siding with the coup. So Jesse Jackson coming out there, at a time when he was suffering from his medical conditions, was a huge act of physical bravery and also political bravery, because he was showing the corruption in his own party and how derelict they were in deferring to Donald Trump and trying to overthrow another Latin American government—just as he opposed it when Ronald Reagan was doing that in the 1980s.

#Max

Yeah. Nancy Pelosi led the standing ovation for Juan Guaidó. And the point I made in this little obituary I wrote for Jesse Jackson is that the Democratic Party, basically under Obama, finally managed to drive him out. The party leadership didn't want him around, but he commanded too much respect. He was with Martin Luther King when he was assassinated in Memphis. He was politically savvy, he had personal gravitas, and he was a trailblazer on foreign policy. A lot of people don't know that Jesse Jackson was a successful diplomat. He actually believed in diplomacy with the designated enemies of the U.S., even though he held no government position.

He negotiated with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad for the release of a Navy pilot who had been shot down while attacking Lebanon. He negotiated with Slobodan Milosevic for the release of, I think, three U.S. soldiers. He was actively engaged with Cuba. He was a back channel for Reagan and Clinton. And he was first driven out because he was angry about the Israel lobby—the Zionist forces in the party that always had a knife at his back. Here's Chuck Schumer trying to stop what he called the Jackson program, or the Jackson platform, in the DNC, which called for a Palestinian state.

#Guest

So let me just set up this clip. Basically, Chuck Schumer here is speaking before a right-wing Zionist crowd in New York. And because he's a Democrat, they're a little hostile to him. He's trying to beg for their respect by saying, "Hey, listen, I'm the guy who stopped Jesse Jackson from getting Palestinian self-determination recognized by the Democratic Party. So show me some respect," as they're booing him. That's Chuck Schumer's appeal to this crowd.

#Speaker 05

I usually begin my speeches by saying I'm glad to be here. I'm not quite sure that's appropriate tonight. When I walked up the stairs, I was pushed. When I came in here... Now, if you don't want to hear the other side—if you don't want to hear the other side—then don't stay in this room.

#Max

For those of you watching from abroad who might not follow U.S. politics as closely as we do, this is the Senate minority leader—the leader of the Democrats in the Senate today.

#Speaker 05

Go wait for your candidate, listen to him, and make yourself feel good, okay? If you don't want to listen to the other side, please leave. I may not convert you to my point of view, but I'll tell you something: if you believe in your argument, you can easily withstand the argument from the other side. And if you can't, then I ask you to leave. Let me remind you—the last time I was booed publicly, and this was the last time—was over something you all supported, because I was the leader in the fight against the pro-Palestinian Jackson plank at the Democratic Convention. I got up on that platform and said exactly what I thought, and certain other states got up and booed my speech, so that, just as tonight, the emcee had to get up and say, "Give the man a chance to be heard." Well, you know what, ladies and gentlemen? It didn't surprise me that it happened there. It surprises me that it happened here.

#Guest

So he's indignant that he's not being greeted warmly by a right-wing Zionist crowd. The reason this clip is important is that it shows the fight within the Democratic Party—one that, at least at the top level, people like Chuck Schumer won. They made sure the Democratic Party, especially on the issue of Palestine, would stay to the right, remain Zionist, and defeat people like Jesse Jackson, who at the time was trying to get a call for Palestinian self-determination into the party's official platform. And here's Chuck Schumer going before a bunch of Zionists and saying, "Hey, I'm the guy who defeated Jesse Jackson, so show me your respect."

At the top of the Democratic Party, certainly, the base has changed, but Chuck Schumer won. People like Jesse Jackson were pushed out. But Jesse Jackson, through the process, brought this issue to national attention. He had a lot of public support for it. Because of people like Chuck Schumer and their hold over the party, his position was defeated. But you can see now who ultimately won in the end, because if you look at the polls today, it's Chuck Schumer who's in the minority, even among his own voters, although he still clings to power.

#Max

Jesse Jackson gave an interview where he privately complained about Zionist forces, especially Mayor Ed Koch in New York, who was an ultra-Zionist—borderline Kahanist. He said something like, "I'm getting run out of Hymie Town." I don't know if we're going to get demonetized for me even saying that.

#Guest

That's worth it.

#Max

I mean, it was such a classic comment. Anyway, he didn't say it publicly. I think the interviewer sold him out and said Jesse Jackson referred to "Hymie Town," and then they just went ballistic on him and ran him out. I think he had to apologize. Jesse Jackson's presidential runs, you know, really focused on class and the class war. As a civil rights leader who could mobilize large numbers of urban Black Americans, he paved the way for Bernie Sanders, who was one of his first endorsers in Vermont. But Bernie Sanders just didn't have the geopolitical chops—the international foreign policy chops—that Jesse Jackson had.

He was much more malleable and pliable. Bernie paved the way for AOC's performance in Munich, which we'll discuss in a minute. There really is no successor to Jesse Jackson. I mean, he definitely was flawed—we're not whitewashing Jesse Jackson—but everyone else within the Democratic Party leadership is. There really was no one who reflected the legacy of Martin Luther King at Riverside Baptist Church in 1967, calling the U.S. the greatest exporter of violence in the world, who stood up against so many imperial schemes, who actually was an accomplished diplomat. And that's because of Obama.

Obama considered Jesse Jackson a real threat when he launched his run for president in 2007. After barely serving in the Senate and having no diplomatic experience, Obama saw him as a threat because he wanted to win over the Zionist lobby and Wall Street, and he wanted to appeal to suburban swing voters. As he was pushing Jesse Jackson out, Jackson was also disgusted with Obama constantly lecturing Black people during the financial crash and housing crisis. He got caught

on a hot mic saying what he really thought about Obama, and that was pretty much the moment when he was pushed out. You want to play that? Yeah.

#Guest

So if you couldn't hear that, Jesse Jackson is speaking very critically about Obama. He's saying Obama's talking down to Black people. And, you know, this was the time when Obama was giving those lectures to Black people to stop complaining—"go call your cousin." Was it Pookie? Yeah, yeah.

#Max

Call your cousin Pookie, get him on the phone, pull your pants up, stop watching SportsCenter.

#Guest

So condescending, and Jesse Jackson was frustrated with that. And when Obama now says, you know, "I stood on Jesse Jackson's shoulders," it's true in more ways than one. Like he said, yes, in terms of Jesse Jackson being a pioneering Black politician who helped make way for Barack Obama—but also, Barack Obama was a political figure deliberately promoted by the establishment to kick the ladder out from under Jesse Jackson, to make sure Jackson could never again be a prominent political leader because of his appeal to the crowd on class-based issues, his criticism of imperialism, and his support for Palestine. So Obama both comes from Jesse Jackson, but also from the need for someone who could sell out Jesse Jackson and take his place—and Obama filled that role.

#Max

Yep, the fake Joshua generation. When they brought up AIPAC's Shakur—aka Hakeem Jeffries—they brought up all these people: Cory Booker, all these politicians backed with AIPAC money. Remember, Obama actually called for Jerusalem to be "undivided" at AIPAC in 2007, in a speech written by the Israel lobbyist Dennis Ross. Jesse Jackson was like the scariest thing—they had to get him out of there. So there's no one in the party today who can really stand on Jesse Jackson's shoulders. And that's why Munich was so pathetic.

I mean, compare it—just go back and watch Jesse Jackson's debate performances in '84 and '88, where he's jousting on foreign policy with right-wing Democrats like Al Gore. And first of all, they're respectful of him; they're kind of afraid of his intellect. Compare that to AOC at Munich, where she has to call a New York Times reporter to complain about all the negative reviews and tell him what to say. It's just really tragic, and a real sign of the downward imperial spiral we're in.