

Why we should support Jesse Jackson

By Jeff Alson

FOR THOSE WHO STRIVE FOR PEACE AND justice, the greatest outcome of the 1988 electoral process would be for Jesse Jackson to shock the professional political pundits and win the presidency. The next best result would be for Jackson to run a strong and aggressive national campaign—and lose.

That progressives have not closed ranks behind the Jackson campaign is astonishing to those of us who have done so. For he is the first serious national presidential candidate in decades to profess truly progressive principles: large military cuts, progressive taxes, new programs such as national health and childcare, and a foreign policy based on moral and economic strength instead of military might. Jackson's entire life has been devoted to empowering people; and indeed his politics have evolved out of that process. Yet, many on the left have not endorsed the Jackson campaign.

It is apparent that the primary reason why many progressives remain ambivalent toward Jackson's candidacy is the perception that he cannot win. There are strong arguments both for and against this thesis. Of course, if enough people fail to support Jackson because they believe he cannot win, that will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But whether Jackson can win may not be all that important, for enormous

benefits could accrue even from a strong but losing Jackson campaign.

Winning the war: The Jackson candidacy is the electoral manifestation of an ongoing movement for peace, justice and equality. Most political campaigns are unidirectional—they sap energy and resources from groups that stand to gain if the candidate gets elected, but they do little to replenish the effectiveness of those groups. But in this case there is a symbiosis between the Jackson campaign and the ongoing movement. When hundreds of thousands march in Washington on Central America or South Africa or for jobs or against AIDS, and Jackson speaks, he accepts the political demands of the marchers and becomes accountable to them.

Probably the most significant and lasting impact of the Jackson campaign is the hope that it gives those who have been living the American nightmare, particularly young and poor blacks who most readily identify with Jackson. As the late novelist James Baldwin put it, "Nothing will ever again be what it was before. It changes the way the boy in the street and the boy on death row and his mother and father and his sweetheart and his sister think about themselves. It indicates that one is not entirely at the mercy of the assumptions of this republic, to what they have said you are."

Getting the people Jackson refers to as



Bill Stamets

"the damned, the despised and the dispossessed" involved must be one key to increasing the likelihood of real social change. Jackson was partially responsible for 2 million new black registrations (1.2 million in the South) in 1984 and we can expect continued progress this year, with other non-voters responding to his message.

This expansion of the Democratic electoral base has already brought some important victories. Critical to regaining control

white voters. Blacks, who comprise 20 or more percent of the vote in each of these states, turned out in higher numbers partially as a result of Jackson's efforts. The clearest impact was the rejection of Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court.

Jackson's issues-oriented campaign also is having a direct political impact. The media attention is permitting him to introduce ideas about economic justice and a moral foreign policy to tens of millions of Americans. In this way the campaign helps to extend the scope of political debate in this country, laying the foundation for left victories on specific issues in the future.

A strong Jackson presence at the Democratic convention with, say, 20 percent of the overall delegates, will permit him and his supporters to influence the party. Of course, in a divided convention his support could be essential in choosing the presidential nominee. At minimum, Jackson will influence the selection of the vice president, the platform, and the myriad party leadership positions.

As the first non-white male to become a serious candidate, Jackson is breaking down a multitude of institutional barriers that will make it easier for others that follow. By establishing himself and the movement on the left of the party spectrum, he plants important seeds as well. In a two-party system an ideological movement must be nurtured over time.

A lesson from the right: In 1964, Barry Goldwater's landslide loss was considered to be the death knell of the Republican right. Instead, it laid the foundation for the right to build upon, culminating in victories in 1980 and 1984 by a man who a mere decade earlier was thought to be far too extreme to be taken seriously as a national candidate. Jackson's candidacy may have equally historic importance.

Electoral politics are inherently problematic for some on the American left. Both our political system's institutional structures and the nature of economic and political control promote a process that leaves progressives bound by "lessers of evil-ism" and accommodation with the center. But history has presented us with an opportunity we cannot afford to ignore: for once, to support a candidate and a set of ideals that we believe in, and that have a chance to win.

Jeff Alson is an environmentalist in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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of the Senate in 1986 were narrow Democratic victories in four southern states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and North Carolina) despite large deficits among

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Alter the vote

A practical illustration of the immediate effect of the House vote against aid to the contras came the day after President Reagan's proposal lost by eight votes. Contras ambushed a civilian vehicle in Segovia province in northern Nicaragua and killed 19 people including women and children.

The rejection of Reagan's \$36.5 million package was certainly a victory and those who capped long months of lobbying and organizational work had every right to go out and celebrate, but realism should not be abandoned. As the fate of those 19 Nicaraguans suggests, the contras will not stop murdering people, and have the supplies to accomplish that task, courtesy of the criminal negligence of the mainstream U.S. media.

Anyone who watched the House debate on February 3 must have been struck by the number of representatives who invoked the devotion of the U.S. to the Guatemalan (or "Arias") accords and who felt no shame in saying that so far as lack of "trust" was concerned, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega was the man to watch. (This personalization reached comical extremes right after the vote when the *San Francisco Chronicle's* headline read "Ortega Says War Will Continue Till Reagan Accepts His Terms," and the story below reported that Ortega warned his people not to expect "a process of peace and democracy" until President Reagan "comes to terms with the Sandinista revolution."

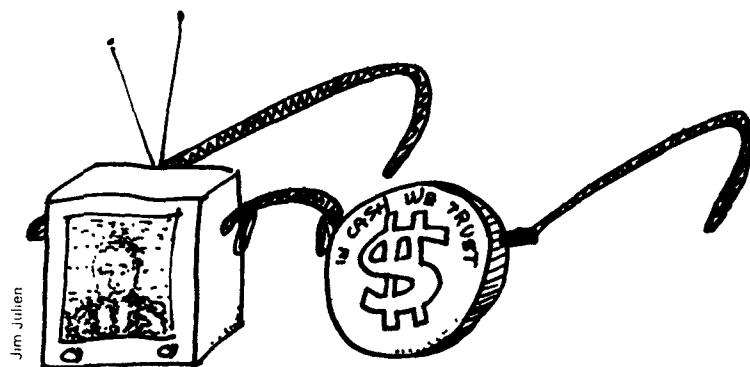
If the mainstream press had not been exhibiting the above-mentioned criminal negligence they would have reported that so far as the U.S. government was concerned the main consequence of the signing of the accords was a stepping up of illegal supply flights to the contras to one a day, allowing the contras to stockpile the arms, thus being able—as the press is now reporting without explaining why—to go on fighting for months to come, against the time the U.S. Congress changes its mind again.

Most of the time I watched the debate the screen seemed entirely filled with foam-flecked simulacra of Rep. Robert Dornan (R-CA) and it came as a distinct shock to see the venerable Rep. George Crockett (D-MI) quoting to his colleagues in the House something the mainstream media had omitted entirely: the call in the accords to all powers outside the region to stop supporting insurgent forces, viz., the contras; also the judgment of the independent verification commission set up to monitor compliance with the accords, that the U.S. had, by its supplies to the contras, been undermining the peace process.

The consequence of this failure in the press performing its supposed function will become clear over the months to come. The focus will be entirely on Nicaraguan duplicity and "bad faith," in which headlines will be given to any contra or contra-sympathizer inside or outside Nicaragua who cares to claim that Ortega and his comrades are not living up to a peace "process," his "process" redefined to mean the restoration of full capitalist relations in Nicaragua, re-writing of the Nicaraguan constitution to suit Elliott Abrams and Enrique Bermudez, pre-emptive amnesty to the men who blew up those 19 people on that bus. There will be covert operations similar to the one hatched between Lt. Col. Oliver North and Panamanian Gen. Manuel Noriega designed to show that the Sandinistas are covertly

ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn



aiding the Salvadoran FMLN. There will, in particular, be pressure to make the Sandinistas give a second TV channel to the opposition, the better to display their dedication to "democracy."

In other words, the war is not over by any means. What the vote did show is that the obdurate timidity of Congress and willful misinformation provided by the press were finally overwhelmed by popular opinion and by a tremendous grass-roots organizing effort that—perhaps fortunately—also went largely unnoticed in the mainstream press. The *New York Times*/CBS News poll taken between January 17 and 21 reflects the popular U.S. view of contra aid: 30 percent approved, 58 percent disapproved. More strikingly still, there was opposition in every category from left to right: conservatives were against contra aid 51 to 34.

The grass-roots organizing was nationwide, innovative and effective and it demonstrated yet again that the solidarity movement with Nicaragua is one of the broadest in the history of the country. This may not be known by the mainstream media, but it is certainly apparent to the campaign managers of the Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination. When Mike Dukakis starts denouncing the CIA's secret wars and the U.S.' bloodstained record in Central America you may be sure it is not just because someone gave him a book by Noam Chomsky.

Can the U.S. press improve?

The matter of democracy and the mass media was the topic of a one-day conference in Los Angeles on January 30, organized by the group FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting). As one who participated I can say that I've rarely seen a more enthusiastic audience or one more interested in getting something done. Fourteen hundred registered and hundreds more were turned away. The only people who declined to appear were mainstream journalists—aside from columnist Jonathan Kwitny of the *Wall Street Journal*—thus providing an interesting contrast to MORE's A.J. Liebling Conventions of the early '70s. MORE's events were filled with mainstreamers, up to and including news proprietors in the shape of Katharine Graham of the *Washington Post*. In those distant days there was brave talk about democracy in the newsroom and other uplifting concepts. The battle lines are more clearly drawn.

The panels took people through familiar terrain: bias and omission, Central America, the Middle East, arms control, "national security." FAIR's material, including its monthly newsletter *Extra!* (call FAIR at 212-

475-4640, or write to it at 666 Broadway, Suite 40, NYC, NY, 10012), was on hand to furnish some fine examples of mainstream cretinism. My favorite is George Volsky's cautious mention in the *New York Times* for January 20 of Honduras "whose territory is reportedly an important part of the U.S.-directed contra supply effort" (emphasis added). If anyone starts denying that the U.S. major media are government-influenced, show them that. Equally instructive was a list in one edition of *Extra!* of *New York Times* headlines about the Russian Revolution in its early days. People perturbed by reports from Stephen Kinzer and James LeMoyné of collapsing Sandinistas may be encouraged to know that between November 1917 and November 1919 the *New York Times* reported the collapse of the Soviets 91 times. Headlines in 1919 included, "Jan. 9, Trotsky Dictator—Arrests Lenin—Ousts Bolshevik Premier and Now Rules Alone in Russia..." Jan. 11, "Kremlin is Lenin's Prison," though Lenin was not idle during his incarceration since another headline in the paper that day announced that "Lenin Abolishes Money..." October 31, "Lenin Plans To Lie Low. Says Reds Must Await Another Chance When Soviet Regime Falls."

There's no particular secret as to why FAIR's conference was such a well-attended event. The broadness of the anti-intervention and solidarity movements concerning Central America has produced an important segment of the educated public, as well supplied with its alternative sources of information—including personal experience in the region—and filled with knowledge which runs directly counter to what is seen on mainstream television and read in major newspapers or magazines. This is a critical opposition that really knows what it is talking about.

Second, the contradictions between the pretensions of the "free press" and the squalid reality have become more vulgarly apparent than ever. As Jeff Cohen, executive director of FAIR, pointed out in his speech, NBC is owned by a corporation, General Electric, which is the country's second-largest military contractor, second-largest vendor of nuclear power systems. With such facts on the table it is impossible to talk about a free and independent press without bursting into laughter. Third, the constant re-definition of permissible political discourse further and further to the right has made an increasingly large number of people acutely aware that about half the political and cultural spectrum is now thus disenfranchised venues of public debate in the major media.

Hence the increasing fury at the undemocratic nature of the major media, sequestered in accelerating oligopoly and compliant to the dictates of government, making

the worst of both worlds, private ownership and state control. The question is: where does a campaign against this perversion of democracy lead?

It begins with agitation and pressure—calls to TV producers, letters to editors, media outreach and education. It continues with political and cultural organizing, particularly in the case of publicly funded radio and TV along with creation of alternative media. It defines what a truly vigorous struggle for free communications could include, such as enforced divestiture of NBC and GE, accountability by PBS, restructuring of the entire system of broadcast license-holding and public ownership and access to broadcasting by other than the wealthy.

Anyone talking seriously about democracy and mass media is led rapidly toward an overall social vision and the need for a political movement to propel the march towards it. I recently read an acute analysis by Robert McChesney, of the School of Communications at the University of Washington, of the reasons for the lack of debate, concerning the ownership, structure and control of the mass media in American political life. Why, asks McChesney, did the opposing forces fail, even though the final struggle took place in the onset of the Depression when disgust with corporate control was profound?

He answers that in essence, capitalism and the sanctity of private property were off limits as a topic for public discussion—as they had been since at least World War I. So the reformers were thus ill-equipped to answer the commercial broadcasters.

The upshot of these failures were, as McChesney writes, "the corporate media have actively cultivated an ideology that the status quo is the *only* rational media structure available to a democratic and freedom-loving society. The corporate media have ardently encouraged the belief that even the consideration of alternatives was tantamount to a call for totalitarianism." This absurd posture is invariably maintained by the employees of the corporate media whose cultural and political vision has the same conceptual radius as their companies' annual reports, and the journalism schools who reproduce the vision and personnel serving the system.

So it's clear that criticism of the corporate media ends up with a basic political program, resting on the proposition that there is a fundamental contradiction between a corporately owned press and a press fulfilling its duties as a critical social institution. It is not as though such questions have not been raised in the past. As recently as the late '60s the Federal Communications Commission under President Johnson was rejecting a bid by International Telephone and Telegraph for ABC on the grounds that it was contrary to the public interest. In the mid-'30s the philosopher John Dewey was arguing in his essay "Our Un-Free Press" that though minor reform of press performance was not to be discouraged, "The only really fundamental approach is to enquire concerning the necessary effect of the present economic system upon the whole system of publicity...The question, under this mode of approach, is not how many specific abuses there are and how they may be remedied, but how far genuine intellectual freedom and social responsibility are possible on any large scheme under the existing economic regime."