The TEXAS Triangle

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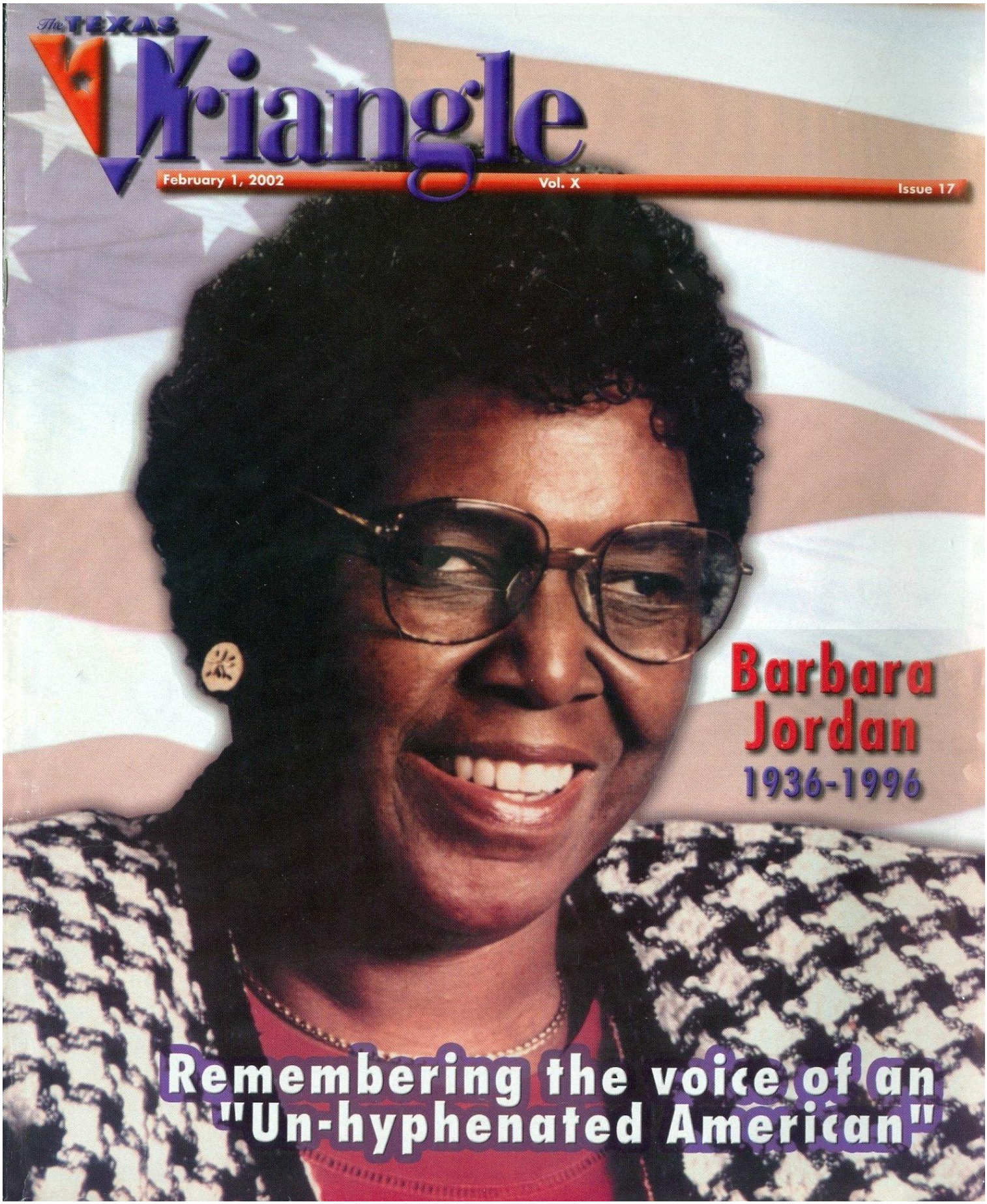

# Barbara Jordan
## 1936-1996

# Remembering the voice of an "Un-hyphenated American"

# Born in the U.S.A.

## Barbara Jordan

### Remembering the voice of an "Un-hyphenated American"

**By Ann Rostow**

Barbara Jordan would probably not appreciate being the cover girl for the kick off of Black History Month in a gay newspaper. She never identified as a minority of any sort. As she described herself two months before her death: "I am an un-hyphenated American," and from her, those were not empty words. In her famous keynote address to the 1976 Democratic National Convention, Jordan told the enraptured crowd:

"The greatest danger America faces is that we will cease to be one nation and become a collection of interest groups - city against suburb, region against region, individual against individual, each seeking to satisfy private wants. If this happens, who then will speak for America? Who then will speak for the common good?"

Standing there on the podium in Madison Square Garden that summer evening, the 40-year-old Congresswoman was arguably at the height of her political career. In the first serious biography to describe her life, Mary Beth Rogers quotes the reaction of the quintessential New York columnist Jimmy Breslin. Jordan, he wrote, "was the boss of the high density livers…the ones who are out on the street hurling language into the night air. Here she came, and she knew exactly how to bring this big motley hall into order and send a chill through the nation." If you're over thirty-five, you probably felt that chill.

This article kicks off Black History Month in a gay newspaper at a time when "identity politics" is on the debate table. And whether she would have appreciated it or not, there is no one better than Barbara Jordan to frame that debate. Her reputation as an American who transcended labels is common knowledge to anyone who knew her or has studied her life. Yet she was more complicated than that reputation suggests. There were several labels she took on willingly. She was a Texan. She was proud of her Houston Fifth Ward roots. She was religious, although expansive in her faith. She was a Democrat, a Johnson loyalist, a politician, a pragmatist.

Those were labels she liked. The ones that added something extra to a person rather than subtracted everything that didn't fit the label's stereotype. Although she championed equality, she would not have called herself a "civil rights leader" or a "feminist." But certainly, she was both and more. She just incorporated these roles into a larger cause, and disliked being diminished into something smaller. That was why she kept her personal life private, in life and in death. That was why she hid the debilitating illness that cut short her public career. And that is why she remains an icon, who still defies our attempts to categorize and define who she was. But Breslin had her down. She lived a large part of her relatively-short life literally and figuratively "hurling language into the night air." Had she been a poet or a musician, we'd simply admire her talent. But because she was a deft politician, and because the language she hurled our way articulated the complex fundamental principles by which we live as Americans, we somehow owe her more.

In her biography, *Barbara Jordan, American Hero*, Mary Beth Rogers describes a woman of great determination, who sacrificed health, leisure time and all the other things one would expect to sacrifice, for personal excellence. High school contests, law school studies, political campaigns, lawmaking, teaching. Whatever Jordan was up to, she was damn well going to be the best, or do her best, which was generally the same thing. But between the lines drifts an image of the personal Jordan that Rogers declines to delineate. Icon perhaps. But the personal side of Barbara Jordan shared the original energies that kept the public side on fire. Driven by what might be described as a lust for the deep exhilaration of a really good life, Barbara Jordan was one of those people who tapped everything she had. She worked hard. But she played hard, in the good sense of that expression. She sang, she drank, she smoked, she partied, she lived fully. She had an extraordinary sense of humor. The same booming voice that took the nation's breath away on that July night in 1976, tossed anecdotes into dinner parties, impersonated colleagues, and belted out the St. James Infirmary Blues. The forces that drove her to succeed professionally, also drove her to revel in her personal life, to draw around herself the concentric circles of the people she loved and liked, but to keep those circles closed.

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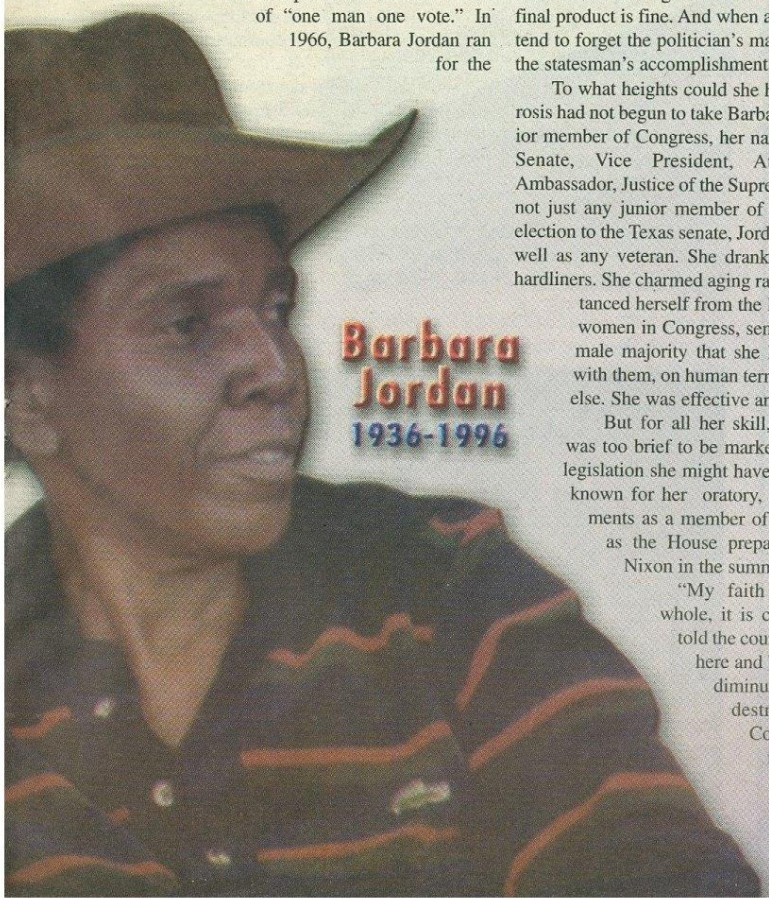
Jordan's life story began between the two World Wars, in an all-Black culture two decades before the seminal Supreme Court case that dismantled the formal infrastructure of American racism. To summarize her youth, she was just great. Top of the class. Star of the debate team. "Girl of the Year" at Phyllis Wheatley High School. In 1952, Jordan started her freshman studies at Texas Southern University, which had only just changed its name from "Texas State University for Negroes" the year before. When Jordan entered college, Brown vs. Board of Education was still

two years away, and she was one of the rare Black women in the country to attend university. But she was going further than that. At some point in high school, Jordan writes in her 1979 autobiography, she decided she was going to be a lawyer, "or rather something called a lawyer. I had no fixed notion of what that was." The goal may have been vague. But it evolved, she wrote, "at the time when I decided I was not going to be like all the rest."

Although Jordan was an impressive child and young adult, the character that set her apart from other bright kids passed a crucible in her first year of law school. There at Boston University, (one of the few law schools that accepted Black women at the time), Jordan recognized that her education, by virtue of her race, had been second rate. No matter that she had been a first rate student, even the most mediocre of the white brains in her entering law school class were far better prepared. In her first two years at BU, a woman who was certainly the intellectual superior of most or all of her peers, had to study nonstop - really night and day - in order to make passing grades. Not because of her ability. But because she had been raised and schooled in the Black America of the 1940s and '50s. It was the first time that racism hit home to Barbara Jordan, and for the first time, but not the last time, she just dealt with it.

When Jordan passed the Texas bar, her biographer reports, she was one of three female Black lawyers in the entire state. Quickly bored with the mundane tasks of private practice, she volunteered for the Kennedy campaign and began to make political contacts. Her talent, ambition, debate training, and her stentorian voice, drew notice, and with the encouragement of certain local power brokers, Jordan ran unsuccessfully for the Texas House in 1962 and 1964. In both races, the Black votes of the Fifth Ward and elsewhere were overwhelmed by the white votes of Harris County. But in 1965, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court put the kibosh on a range of unfair districting plans that compromised the basic tenet of "one man one vote." In 1966, Barbara Jordan ran for the state senate under new rules and won handily, becoming the first Black woman to serve in the state legislature, and one of the first two Black lawmakers elected in over 70 years. That's how long racist poll taxes and districting practices had been in place in Texas.




Jordan was 30 years old when she took her place among the white men in the 1966 Texas senate. She was young. She was Black. She was female. It was 1966. Talk about your Frank Capra movie. And she lived the screenplay that he would have written. Six years later, after the 1970 census led to a new U.S. Congressional district in Houston, (and Jordan helped draw its boundaries), she would live the second half of the movie, succeeding in a white man's world by virtue of her differences, her skill, her hard work, and above all, by her unusual political instincts.

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The Black community claims Barbara Jordan. The women's community claims her. Houston claims her. Texas claims her. The gay community would like to claim her. But one community that also has a major claim to Jordan is the much-maligned community of professional politicians.

Instinctively, and by nature, Barbara Jordan understood that politics is human. It is detailed. It is messy. It requires effort. "A statesman," said Harry Truman, "is a politician who's been dead 10 or 15 years." By Truman's timetable, Jordan qualified a few years early. But the quip reflects the tension between the dirty job of politics - hammering out deals, trading favors, engineering subtle shifts in a herd mentality, making a bad vote for a larger good, all of that - and the end result of leading the representatives of a diverse people to a consensus that makes life better. Under American democracy, it takes - not just ideals - but political acumen to accomplish that difficult task. As someone said, making law is like making sausage. You don't want to see the ingredients or watch the process, but the final product is fine. And when all is said and done, people tend to forget the politician's maneuvering, and remember the statesman's accomplishment a decade later.

To what heights could she have risen if multiple sclerosis had not begun to take Barbara Jordan down? As a junior member of Congress, her name was bandied about for Senate, Vice President, Attorney General, U.N. Ambassador, Justice of the Supreme Court. But Jordan was not just any junior member of Congress. Ever since her election to the Texas senate, Jordan had played the game as well as any veteran. She drank whisky with Republican hardliners. She charmed aging racists. She deliberately distanced herself from the Black Caucus and the few women in Congress, sending a signal to the white male majority that she had as much in common with them, on human terms, as she did with anyone else. She was effective and liked as a result.

But for all her skill, Jordan's political career was too brief to be marked by the lengthy lists of legislation she might have compiled. Instead, she is known for her oratory, beginning with her comments as a member of the Judiciary Committee as the House prepared to impeach Richard Nixon in the summer of 1974.

"My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total," she told the country. "I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution." Those lines, from remarks that she had prepared just an hour or so before the committee convened, are some of her most famous. Yet the statement as a whole was not simply inspiring. It was the first decent explanation of just what the hell was going on, and it allowed America to understand the context of Watergate after months of confusion. After the impeachment crisis, Jordan received thousands of letters of thanks and appreciation from people all over the country. During those hearings, says her biographer, Jordan "began her transformation from a politician to a patriot, from an inside player who could get a law passed to an inspirational leader who could influence the beliefs and actions of an entire people. Barbara Jordan became a national leader that week."

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In an October 1976 article for the *Texas Monthly*, Walter Shapiro, (who was then an editor for the *Washington Monthly*), examined the gap between Jordan's legislative record and her national stature. Four years into her Congressional tenure, Shapiro described her as "the best-known member of the House of Representatives." But why? Setting aside the impact of her Watergate presentation and her convention keynote, Shapiro said the answer lies in her style - "not her speaking style, although that is part of it, but her legislative style, which is unique among the 435 members of the House. It has many aspects, but the one consistent thread is this: she goes to great lengths not to identify herself any group, bloc, or constituency….By taking care to adhere to the old ways, by emphasizing symbolic gestures, and by showing a reverence for Congress as an institution, she has managed to create the illusion that her vote cannot be taken for granted, when in fact it is almost as predictable [as that of the most liberal Democrat.]"

In avoiding her many potential hyphens, she did not avoid the convictions of her communities, only the limitations of becoming a collection of private wants. "If we are whole people," Jordan told an audience in 1984. "there are some very old words which will be used to define us, words like truth, virtue, honesty. Our political and policy decisions will reflect them and be released once we are old. Our political and policy decisions will be released, can be released, for ethical analysis and hold up wonderfully, with a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds."

By the time she made that speech, Jordan had retired from Congress and become a professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs in Austin, teaching political ethics among other subjects. Multiple sclerosis had weakened her legs and within a short time she would be wheelchair bound. According to her biography, the harsh drugs that she was taking to fight the MS were carcinogenic, and would lead to her death from leukemia complications in January of 1996. Her life may have been high-density, but it was far too short.

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About two months ago, the gay Log Cabin Republicans issued a think piece and published a series of ads calling for the end of identity politics. In one way, (although she would not have appreciated the LCR's partisan tone), their pitch would have had a supporter in Barbara Jordan. "Adjective" first, "American" second, is not a credible posture in the United States of September 12, 2001. Nor, for most people, at any time.

That said, some people must stand up and put themselves on the line for gay rights, for women's rights, or for racial equality. Barbara Jordan took a unique position, but it was a stance made possible by Martin Luther King Jr. and Thurgood Marshall, who despite their contributions to the entire country, will forever be thought of as great African-Americans because of who they were and what they did. This month is more for them than her. Her life is better celebrated on the Fourth of July.