Vernon Jordan, African American pillar of the establishment, dead at 85

Fred Mazelis
3 March 2021

The announcement that Vernon Jordan had died March 1 at the age of 85 was immediately followed by tributes from the political and corporate establishment. Former presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton were joined by Jordan's colleagues in the top Washington law firm of Akin Gump and the Lazard Freres investment bank on Wall Street in marking his passing.

Many headlines referred to Jordan as a civil rights leader, but those words are highly misleading. He had little connection to the mass movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. during the 1960s. He graduated from Howard University Law School in 1960 and soon began his career as Georgia field director for the NAACP, the organization which little more than a decade earlier had forced out its founder W.E.B. Dubois in the midst of the McCarthyite anticommunist witch hunt. When the Southern mass movement grew in the early 1960s, the NAACP sought at every point to hold it back, and Jordan was only on the fringes of the struggles that mobilized millions.

Later in the 1960s, Jordan became the head of the United Negro College Fund. At the age of 35, he became the president of the National Urban League, the organization which, even more bluntly than the NAACP, typified "gradualism" in the struggle for racial equality, and the collaboration of the petty bourgeois African American establishment with the more "enlightened" sections of big business. Even as a young man, Jordan was oriented not to the workers and youth in the streets, but to the halls of power in Washington and New York, where he offered his services to hold back the mass movement.

Jordan was head of the Urban League during the crucial decade of the 1970s, serving as president from 1971 to 1981. The crisis of these years was laying the basis for the social counterrevolution that deepened drastically with the austerity and unionbusting presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, and has been continued and deepened ever since, presided over by Democrats and Republicans alike.

When Reagan took office, Jordan said of the right-wing Republican, "I do not challenge the conservatism of this administration. I do challenge its failure to exhibit a compassionate conservatism…" Significantly, this slogan of "compassionate conservatism" was later popularized by George W. Bush during his 2000 election campaign, the same one that ended in the stolen election in Florida. The phrase encapsulates the right-wing politics of Vernon Jordan.

After his years at the Urban League, Jordan seized the opportunity to collect financial rewards for services rendered to the ruling class. He became one of the most prominent partners in Akin Gump, joined literally dozens of corporate boards, and quickly became a multimillionaire.

In government circles, the name of Vernon Jordan is most closely associated with Bill Clinton. Jordan met and befriended Clinton in the late 1970s, when the future Democratic president was the young Attorney General of Arkansas. He accompanied Clinton all the way to the White House, leading the president-elect's transition team after the 1992 election and then working behind the scenes as one of Clinton's closest advisers throughout his two terms in office.

Although obituaries in the mainstream media all noted the fact that Jordan had briefly been ensnared in the Monica Lewinsky scandal because of his role in attempting to get the White House intern a job as the scandal unfolded in 1998, they generally passed over his far more significant role as political confidant of Clinton, the Democrat who personified the party's open abandonment of even the pretense of a connection

© World Socialist Web Site

to the struggles of the working class.

Jordan the "civil rights leader" is closely associated with some of Clinton's signature legislative achievements of the 1990s, the 1994 Crime Bill—written by current President and then-Senator Joe Biden—that helped pave the way for mass incarceration and the so-called Welfare Reform bill of 1996 that consigned millions to poverty and poverty-level jobs. This illustrates the way in which the label of civil rights was attached to the most reactionary social legislation since before the New Deal.

For the last several decades, Jordan continued with his lucrative legal and corporate career, while enjoying the reputation of elder statesman of the political establishment. He was not prominently associated with the identity politics wing of the black middle class. He spoke regularly at observances of Martin Luther King Day, such as the "25th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Holiday Breakfast" held in 2015 by the Minneapolis-based Fortune 500 company General Mills.

Jordan called on Americans to "renew our hope…Hope in spite of all obstacles. Hope in the face of defeat. Hope against all odds. Hope, no matter what comes. But hope alone, moves no mountains. And that is where meaningful action must come in. The system today cries out for reform, but it also calls for wise actions and measured responses for change." Platitudes like this match almost word-for-word the ones now coming out the mouth of President Biden.

It is significant that Jordan's career coincides with the last 50 years of uninterrupted onslaught on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class. Far from being the "civil rights icon" hailed by the capitalist media, Jordan based himself on the collapse of the civil rights movement.

The limited gains of the integration of public accommodations, the extension of voting rights and the dismantling of Jim Crow barriers left in place the system of capitalism that could no longer provide any serious measures against poverty, unemployment and decaying public services. In order to fight for the goals of genuine social equality, it was necessary to fight capitalism. This was the crisis that faced King in the last two years of his life, as he struggled to find a way forward, but refused to break from the Democratic Party and the outlook of radical pacifism.

Just a week before his assassination, at an informal strategy meeting in New York, King had lashed out at Andrew Young, then one of his lieutenants and later the mayor of Atlanta and the US Representative to the United Nations. As recounted by Harry Belafonte in his memoir, King said, "I don't need to hear from you, Andy. I've heard enough from you. You're a capitalist, and I'm not. And so we don't see eye to eye—on this and a lot of other stuff."

Jordan, only six years King's junior, faced no similar crisis. He advanced his career on the ashes of the civil rights movement. He was if anything an even more unabashed supporter of capitalism than Andrew Young. In the course of his long career, he met and worked with every US president between Lyndon Johnson and Barack Obama. When editorial boards call Jordan a "civil rights icon" they are celebrating the ability to the US ruling class to use the techniques of black capitalism, affirmative action and identity politics to elevate a thin layer of the African American middle class into the business and political establishment. Jordan was perhaps the most prominent of this layer.

This integration of ruling class circles is directed against the working class of all races and ethnicities. It has gone hand in hand with the efforts to whip up divisions and distractions over race and gender, to keep the lid on the growing anger and struggles of the working class.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site