

The Texan with the Constitution in Her Purse

In January, 2021, our nation inaugurated one president and impeached another. In turbulent times like these, Americans would do well to acquaint themselves with the career of Barbara Jordan. Barbara Jordan was born and raised in Texas, the great-granddaughter of Edward Patton, who had been elected to the Texas state legislature during Reconstruction (“Barbara C. Jordan.”). She continued his legacy when she became Texas’s first African American state senator since the Reconstruction Era (Clines). In 1972, she was elected to the US House of Representatives as the first African American woman from the South (“Barbara C. Jordan.”). Jordan’s optimistic view of the Constitution was possibly her first act of political courage. She noted that, as a black woman, she “was not included in ‘we the people’”, and felt that during the conception of the Constitution, the Founding Fathers had left her out “by mistake” (Eidenmuller). Despite being left out by the Founding Fathers, Jordan believed in adhering to the words of the Constitution: from ‘we the people’ to the impeachment clause. Her unwavering faith in the Constitution resulted in her support of one of the most consequential acts of Congress in modern American history- the impeachment of President Richard Nixon.

John F. Kennedy wrote “In no other occupation but politics is it expected that a man will sacrifice honors, prestige and his chosen career on a single issue” (Kennedy 7). Even with the challenges of being a black woman in the post-Reconstruction era south, Barbara Jordan was able to build a name for herself, becoming well-liked among constituents and colleagues across party lines for her work on Texas’s first minimum wage law (American Women Writers). She was elected to Congress with eighty percent of the vote, evidence of her ability to bring people together and earn their trust (Clines). Yet, she was willing to sacrifice all of this respect and honor (and even her career) on a fairly unpopular position: impeaching the president for abuses of power. She exemplified the sacrifice of which John F. Kennedy spoke (Kennedy, 7). On July 25, 1974, Jordan, a member of the prestigious Judiciary Committee, opened the impeachment hearing for President Richard Nixon, delivering a defense and interpretation of the Constitution that could rival even the Federalist Papers.

When freshman Representative Barbara Jordan began her speech, she did so knowing that those fifteen minutes would redefine her career and possibly even end it. Nixon had won a sweeping reelection (“Watergate Scandal.”). While half of the American population considered Watergate to be a serious concern, only about twenty six percent of Americans thought Nixon should be impeached and removed from office (Kohut). Despite a lack of popular support, Jordan believed the impeachment of President Nixon was crucial for the maintenance of the Constitution. If the charges against Nixon did not reach the impeachment provision of the Constitution, “then perhaps that 18th-century Constitution should be abandoned to a 20th-century paper shredder”(Eidenmuller). Looking back on the Watergate scandal today, one could underestimate the courage of those who spoke out against the abuses of the Nixon

administration. Today, the decision to impeach Richard Nixon is generally considered a reasonable one. But at the time, the American public wasn't as convinced. Like John F. Kennedy, Jordan recognized that sometimes the popularity of an issue must not matter in the face of the national good. Kennedy writes the driving forces that discourage acts of political courage include the "desire to be reelected" and the pressure of one's constituency (Kennedy 6-9). Jordan did not succumb to those forces, instead declaring she was "not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution" (Eidenmuller).

Another serious concern of the American people was that the impeachment process was just dirty politics, a ruse to get Nixon out of office. These proceedings were going on against the backdrop of racial strife and the Vietnam War, which had claimed the lives of more than 58,000 Americans by 1974 (Vietnam War). Jordan urged her colleagues to not let the other crises they faced outweigh the importance of what they had been sworn to do: "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic" (Oath of Office). Lawmakers today face similar competing priorities with an economic recession and a pandemic claiming the lives of 350,000 Americans (Provisional Death Counts). Jordan would remind them that defending the Constitution is worthy of America's attention, no matter what. "In the face of such overwhelming problems", she reminded her colleagues that engaging "upon this process for petty reasons" would be nonsensical. The process of impeachment must be undertaken not for politics and partisanship, but for the preservation of our constitution (Eidenmuller). Even though there was very little public support for the impeachment proceedings, and countless other pressing issues for Congress to address, Jordan had the strength and courage to stand up and say that preserving our Constitution is always worth the fight.

In the end, Barbara Jordan's acts of courage did not go unrecognized: in 1994 she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor, for her efforts protecting the Constitution ("Barbara C. Jordan."). Kennedy warned of the influence election politics could have on policy. Jordan maintained her independence, was elected twice more, and in a final act of courage stepped down to pursue a higher calling of teaching. Her students remembered her "as never being without a copy of the Constitution in her purse" (Clines). Following the Insurrection of January 6, 2021, the United States is at a critical inflection point, and American lawmakers will be facing extremely difficult choices. They must dig deep to embody the qualities of political courage JFK so admired in his book *Profiles in Courage*. They must look past both party and popularity and seek to act for the national good. They can and should look to Representative Barbara Jordan, whose courageous words continue to teach us the importance of the Constitution.

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