

Barbara Jordan (1936-1996)

Statement at the U.S. House Judiciary Committee Impeachment Hearings

Washington, D.C. - July 25, 1974

Barbara Jordan marked history in a number of ways, using the power of her speech and the clarity of her mind to break down barriers of race and gender. The New York Times described her oratory as "Churchillian," and one writer suggested that her deep, Olympian sound could galvanize listeners "as though Winston Churchill had been reincarnated as a black woman from Texas."¹ Jordan was named Best Living Orator by a professional speakers' organization. Texas columnist Molly Ivins said that Jordan would be the obvious choice in a casting call for the voice of God.²

The youngest of three daughters of a Baptist minister in a poor Houston neighborhood, Jordan attended segregated schools, graduated from the all-black Texas Southern University, and earned a law degree from Boston University in 1959, where she was deeply affected by Howard Thurman, dean of Marsh Chapel. Jordan was so moved by Thurman's Sunday sermons she would preach them again to her dormitory roommates.³

In 1966, Jordan became the first African American elected to the Texas Senate. She went on to become the first black person elected to Congress from Texas since Reconstruction. On the national scene, Jordan's defining moment came in 1974 when she earned a spot on the House committee considering impeachment charges against President Richard Nixon. The committee was examining whether Nixon's involvement in the cover-up of the Watergate burglary, including possible obstruction of justice, constituted the kind of "high crimes and misdemeanors" meriting impeachment. Jordan's eleven-minute statement in the committee's public hearings was broadcast on prime-time television. She won national acclaim for giving a measured, eloquent lesson on the constitutional principles at stake.

It was a speech she did not initially want to make. In her autobiography, Jordan said she thought the committee should stick to fact-finding instead of speechmaking. "The reaction from the other committee members was: 'You must be out of your head.' It seemed they all wanted that fifteen minutes on television," Jordan wrote.⁴

The night before her statement was scheduled, Jordan sat down to write. More senior committee members had already made their statements, and Jordan was struck by how they all seemed to start by quoting the preamble to the Constitution, "We the people ..." "It occurred to me that not one of them had mentioned that back then the preamble was not talking about all the people," Jordan wrote. "So I said: 'Well, I'll just start with that.'"⁵ The next evening, when the camera focused on her, Jordan opened with an African American perspective on the Constitution, then quickly moved her rhetorical position to that of all "the people" covered by that document of

protections and promises. Jordan declared she would not be an idle spectator to "the destruction of the Constitution" by Richard Nixon and his administration. In methodical and determined tones, she unfolded the constitutional standards that President Nixon had appeared to have violated. Two days later, on July 27, 1974, Jordan voted to impeach the president (Nixon would resign before the Senate commenced a trial). Telegrams and letters poured into Jordan's office in the days following her speech. A man put up billboards all over Houston thanking Jordan for explaining the Constitution.⁶

Jordan served six years in Congress, then taught at the University of Texas. In 1976, she was the first black woman to deliver the keynote address at a Democratic National Convention. She also gave the keynote address in 1992, this time from a wheelchair; she had been afflicted by multiple sclerosis. Jordan died in 1996 from pneumonia, a complication of leukemia. One writer lamented that Jordan's booming voice, with its thundering call to principles enshrined in the Constitution, was "a song of the past."⁷

[Listen to the speech](#)

Mr. Chairman, I join my colleague Mr. Rangel in thanking you for giving the junior members of this committee the glorious opportunity of sharing the pain of this inquiry. Mr. Chairman, you are a strong man, and it has not been easy but we have tried as best we can to give you as much assistance as possible.

Earlier today, we heard the beginning of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, "We, the people." It's a very eloquent beginning. But when that document was completed, on the seventeenth of September in 1787, I was not included in that "We, the people." I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision, I have finally been included in "We, the people."

Today I am an inquisitor. An hyperbole would not be fictional and would not overstate the solemnness that I feel right now. My faith in the Constitution is whole; it is complete; it is total. And I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction, of the Constitution.

"Who can so properly be the inquisitors for the nation as the representatives of the nation themselves? The subjects of its jurisdiction are those offenses which proceed from the misconduct of public men." And that's what we are talking about. In other words, the jurisdiction comes from the abuse or violation of some public trust. It is wrong, I suggest, it is a misreading of the Constitution for any member here to assert that for a member to vote for an article of impeachment means that the member must be convinced that the president should be removed from office. The Constitution doesn't say that. The powers relating to impeachment are an essential check in the hands of the body of the legislature against and upon the encroachments of the executive. The division between the two branches of the legislature, the House and the



Senate, assigning to the one the right to accuse and to the other the right to judge, the framers of this Constitution were very astute. They did not make the accusers and the judges the same person.

We know the nature of impeachment. We have been talking about it awhile now. "It is chiefly designed for the president and his high ministers" to somehow be called into account. It is designed to "bridle" the executive if he engages in excesses. "It is designed as a method of national inquest into the conduct of public men." The framers confined in the Congress the power if need be, to remove the president in order to strike a delicate balance between a president swollen with power and grown tyrannical, and preservation of the independence of the executive. The nature of impeachment, is a narrowly channeled exception to the separation-of-powers maxim; the Federal Convention of 1787 said that.

It limited impeachment to high crimes and misdemeanors and discounted and opposed the term "maladministration." "It is to be used only for great misdemeanors," so it was said in the North Carolina ratification convention. And in the Virginia ratification convention: "We do not trust our liberty to a particular branch. We need one branch to check the other."

"No one need be afraid," the North Carolina ratification convention: "No one need be afraid that officers who commit oppression will pass with immunity." "Prosecutions of impeachments will seldom fail to agitate the passions of the whole community," said Hamilton in the Federalist Papers, no. 65. "We divide into parties more or less friendly or inimical to the accused." I do not mean political parties in that sense.

The drawing of political lines goes to the motivation behind impeachment; but impeachment must proceed within the confines of the constitutional term "high crimes and misdemeanors." Of the impeachment process, it was Woodrow Wilson who said that "Nothing short of the grossest offenses against the plain law of the land will suffice to give them speed and effectiveness. Indignation so great as to overgrow party interest may secure a conviction; but nothing else can."

Common sense would be revolted if we engaged upon this process for petty reasons. Congress has a lot to do: Appropriations Tax Reform, Health Insurance, Campaign Finance Reform, Housing, Environmental Protection, Energy Sufficiency, Mass Transportation. Pettiness cannot be allowed to stand in the face of such overwhelming problems. So today we are not being petty. We are trying to be big, because the task we have before us is a big one.

This morning, in a discussion of the evidence, we were told that the evidence which purports to support the allegations of misuse of the CIA by the President is thin. We are told that that evidence is insufficient. What that recital of the evidence this morning did not include is what the President did know on June the 23rd, 1972.

The President did know that it was Republican money, that it was money from the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, which was found in the possession of one of the burglars



arrested on June the 17th. What the President did know on the 23rd of June was the prior activities of E. Howard Hunt, which included his participation in the break-in of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, which included Howard Hunt's participation in the Dita Beard ITT affair, which included Howard Hunt's fabrication of cables designed to discredit the Kennedy administration.

We were further cautioned today that perhaps these proceedings ought to be delayed because certainly there would be new evidence forthcoming from the President of the United States. There has not even been an obfuscated indication that this committee would receive any additional materials from the President. The committee subpoena is outstanding, and if the President wants to supply that material, the committee sits here. The fact is that on yesterday, the American people waited with great anxiety for eight hours, not knowing whether their President would obey an order of the Supreme Court of the United States.

At this point, I would like to juxtapose a few of the impeachment criteria with some of the actions the President has engaged in. Impeachment criteria: James Madison, from the Virginia ratification convention. "If the President be connected in any suspicious manner with any person and there be grounds to believe that he will shelter him, he may be impeached."

We have heard time and time again that the evidence reflects the payment to defendants money. The President had knowledge that these funds were being paid and these were funds collected for the 1972 presidential campaign. We know that the President met with Mr. Henry Petersen twenty-seven times to discuss matters related to Watergate and immediately thereafter met with the very persons who were implicated in the information Mr. Petersen was receiving. The words are "If the president is connected in any suspicious manner with any person and there be grounds to believe that he will shelter that person, he may be impeached."

Justice Story: "Impeachment is intended for occasional and extraordinary cases where a superior power acting for the whole people is put into operation to protect their rights and rescue their liberties from violations."

We know about the Huston plan. We know about the break-in of the psychiatrist's office. We know that there was absolute complete direction on September 3rd when the president indicated that a surreptitious entry had been made into Dr. Fielding's office, after having met with Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Young.

"Protect their rights." "Rescue their liberties from violation."

The Carolina ratification convention impeachment criteria: those are impeachable "who behave amiss or betray their public trust."

Beginning shortly after the Watergate break-in and continuing to the present time, the President has engaged in a series of public statements and actions designed to thwart the lawful



investigation by government prosecutors. Moreover, the President has made public announcements and assertions bearing on the Watergate case, which the evidence will show he knew to be false. These assertions, false assertions, impeachable, those who misbehave. Those who "behave amiss or betray the public trust."

James Madison again at the Constitutional Convention: "A President is impeachable if he attempts to subvert the Constitution."

The Constitution charges the President with the task of taking care that the laws be faithfully executed, and yet the President has counseled his aides to commit perjury, willfully disregard the secrecy of grand jury proceedings, conceal surreptitious entry, attempt to compromise a federal judge, while publicly displaying his cooperation with the processes of criminal justice.

"A President is impeachable if he attempts to subvert the Constitution."

If the impeachment provision in the Constitution of the United States will not reach the offenses charged here, then perhaps that 18th-century Constitution should be abandoned to a 20th-century paper shredder.

Has the President committed offenses, and planned, and directed, and acquiesced in a course of conduct which the Constitution will not tolerate? That's the question. We know that. We know the question. We should now forthwith proceed to answer the question. It is reason, and not passion, which must guide our deliberations, guide our debate, and guide our decision.

I yield back the balance of my time, Mr. Chairman.

1. Francis X. Clines, "Barbara Jordan Dies at 59; Her Voice Stirred the Nation," New York Times, 18 January 1996; Sandy Grady, "Magnificent Voice Stilled at Last," Philadelphia Daily News, 23 January 1996.
2. Molly Ivins, "Barbara Jordan, Closing the Gap in Perception," Los Angeles Times, 8 September 1991.
3. Mary Beth Rogers, Barbara Jordan: American Hero (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 68-71.
4. Barbara Jordan and Shelby Hearon, Barbara Jordan: A Self Portrait (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 184.
5. Ibid., 185-86.
6. Ibid., 193.
7. Grady, "Magnificent Voice Stilled at Last."