Op Ed: What Jackson built, and what Obama completed

By: Johnnie R. McKnight

While getting dressed for work this morning, I had the news on, as I always do. A breaking alert announced that Rev. Jesse Jackson had been hospitalized. The timing was uncanny. I've been reading Abby Phillip's new book, "*A Dream Deferred: Jesse Jackson and the Fight for Black Political Power"*, which reexamines Jackson's legacy and his complicated relationship with Barack Obama. It's a revealing story about two men who shaped Democratic politics in profoundly different ways.

Phillip writes that Jackson believed he had laid the movement's foundation, "the political scaffolding Obama later climbed." Jackson saw himself as inheriting Dr. King's mantle in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. And to his credit, Jackson never missed a chance to remind the world of King's influence on him.

Yet what Jackson struggled to accept, and what Phillip captures so clearly is that Obama ultimately became what Jackson always aspired to be: a unifier. Obama spoke to the entire nation, not a faction of it. He was relatable without being polarizing, sincere without theatrics, empathetic without needing the spotlight to validate him. To millions, he represented humility and calm strength qualities often contrasted with Jackson's reputation for aggressive self-promotion. Within the Black community, Jackson was celebrated as a symbol of pride and possibility. But pride can coexist with a harder truth: one can uplift Black people without tearing others down in the process. Jackson never fully mastered that balance.

At the same time, Jackson possessed something Obama never did: a boldly progressive, unapologetically pro-Black platform grounded in the lived experience of the Civil Rights Movement. Jackson came out of that era with firsthand knowledge of Black struggle knowledge earned on the front lines with Dr. King. That gave him moral authority and an authenticity that electrified millions. Yet it also narrowed his political lens. Jackson often struggled to understand the broader American electorate and how he was viewed outside the movement he helped build.

Still, by his second presidential run, Jackson had built a formidable national campaign with loyal supporters across racial and socioeconomic lines, proof that his message had real resonance, even if it couldn't fully translate into a national majority.

Phillip suggests that Jackson's political perspective was shaped, and limited by the world he grew up in. Obama's worldview, by contrast, came from living biracial in Hawaii, Indonesia, and the mainland United States. He understood White America in ways Jackson did not, not through consultants, but through lived experience. That broader cultural fluency helped Obama build bridges Jackson couldn't.

Their political choices reflected these differences. In 1972, Jackson declined to support Shirley Chisholm's historic presidential run, backing George McGovern after her loss. The irony is unmistakable: Chisholm later supported Jackson's own presidential bid. Obama understood that lesson instinctively. He recognized the central political power of Black women not after the fact, but from the beginning. And they delivered. In 2008, Black women voted at a higher rate than white women. In 2012, they had the highest turnout rate of any race, gender, or ethnic group at 70%. Obama didn't take that support for granted. He invested in it, respected it, and built a strategy around it.

By the time Jackson launched what became the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, he was attempting to build a multiracial movement on a national stage. It was bold, ambitious, and influential—but it never fully broadened into a durable national majority. Jackson also missed a demographic Democrats still struggle to understand today: white middle-class men.

For decades, the party behaved as if white men were either politically expendable or inherently privileged. But life is more complicated. Two of my closest friends since childhood are white men. Their fears, anxieties, and aspirations do not fit the stereotypes Democrats often project onto them.

Fred Hampton understood this long before it became fashionable. His organizing power came from refusing to alienate poor white people, recognizing that their economic struggles often mirrored Black struggle. The "poor white" of Hampton's era has become today's white middle class, squeezed by a volatile economy and fears of downward mobility.

Even Jackson's own campaign manager admitted that many voters admired Jackson but felt compelled to vote elsewhere by November. Symbolic victories are not structural ones, a lesson the Democratic Party continues to grapple with.

Jackson and Obama represent two essential stages of Black political evolution. Jackson was the moral agitator, shaped by protest, prophetic urgency, and the unfinished work of King's movement. Obama was the national conciliator, shaped by multicultural exposure, global perspective, and a country on the cusp of demographic transformation.

Both expanded the boundaries of what American leadership allows Black men to be.
Both redefined their political eras. And both, in different ways, reveal the ongoing tension between movement leadership and national coalition-building.

Their legacies are not in competition, they are in conversation. Jackson opened doors that Obama walked through. Obama fulfilled dreams that Jackson dared to articulate.

And in understanding both men, we better understand the evolution of Black political power, and the leadership America continues to need.