

◀ Return to Full

LexisNexis™ Academic

Copyright 2001 The Washington Post

The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com

The Washington Post

November 19, 2001 Monday

Final Edition

SECTION: STYLE; BOOK WORLD; Pg. C02

LENGTH: 989 words

HEADLINE: Vernon Jordan's Justice

BYLINE: James Forman Jr., a fellow at the New American Foundation

BODY:

"VERNON CAN READ!"

A Memoir

By Vernon E. Jordan Jr.

With Annette Gordon-Reed

Public Affairs. 352 pp. \$ 26Vernon Jordan recalls returning home from his first semester at college to find that his two closest high school friends no longer sought his company. Baffled, he wrote another friend, Ethel Wardell, asking why his buddies had turned against him. "Vernon," she wrote, "you're walking with kings and you've lost the common touch." Jordan penned a one-sentence reply: "Dear Ethel, Kiss my [rear]."

Jordan's high school friends were not his last critics. Many on the black left resented his closeness to Bill Clinton, arguing that it allowed Clinton to claim the mantle of racial progressive even as his administration was overseeing the incarceration of more African American men than at any time in U.S. history. Others, remembering how vigorously Jordan challenged the Carter and Reagan administrations on racial justice issues, saw his public silence during the Clinton years as opportunistic and hypocritical.

Not that Jordan lacks defenders. During the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, when Jordan was challenged on his claim that it was normal for him to help a virtual stranger like Monica Lewinsky find a job, Washington attorney Leslie Thornton detailed in the Wall Street Journal how Jordan had gone out of his way to help her and others. Thornton revealed what many striving young black professionals (and some civil rights movement veterans) had long known privately: Within Washington's elite institutions, Jordan has opened doors for many.

Jordan's own voice has been mostly absent from the overheated debate about his legacy. Fortunately he has changed that with "Vernon Can Read!," an important contribution to the history of the struggle for full integration and black equality. Collaborating with historian Annette Gordon-Reed, Jordan describes his life as a constant struggle to break down barriers faced by African Americans. He has a fine eye for the structural obstacles to achievement. He challenges not just Jim Crow, but also the "meritocracy" of today's corporate world, which he says defines "merit" as "those experiences possessed by a narrow class of white men." Yet Jordan importantly recognizes that American racism, however oppressive, still leaves room for human agency. His mother's lessons of hard work, thrift and sacrifice all helped propel him from an obscure upbringing through the stages of a remarkable public career.

After he graduated from Howard Law School in 1960, Jordan became a civil rights lawyer in Atlanta. He describes eating meals in his car in towns with no black cafeterias, weeping over unjustly executed clients and sitting second chair to the famed civil rights lawyer Constance Motley as they forced the University of Georgia to admit Charlayne Hunter. As the legal and political struggle for integration became increasingly bitter (Jordan remembers white children in the South cheering at the news of Kennedy's assassination), Jordan gradually turned his attention northward, taking the reins of the United Negro College Fund in 1970, until a year later he was chosen to lead the National Urban League.

"The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was about . . . the right to check into the hotel," says Jordan, whereas "the 1970s was about obtaining the wherewithal to check out." As head of the Urban League, Jordan had a prominent role in the struggle for economic justice. He worked on the outside, delivering speeches calling Reagan's policies "racist" and indicting Carter for giving, in his words, "virtually no attention to the goal of full employment, to revamping the welfare system, or to health care and affirmative action." At the same time, Jordan joined numerous corporate boards and played tennis at the White House with Nixon aide John Ehrlichman. Jordan left the Urban League in 1981 to pursue a career as a corporate lawyer. He is well aware that some criticized him for leaving his Urban League post; this memoir is his response to those who would ask, "Why aren't you in Mississippi helping your people?"

By devoting such attention to his early years in the movement, Jordan reminds his critics that he paid his dues in the South. But he also has a more profound rejoinder to the sellout accusation. Jordan uses his personal story to reject the view that "only certain jobs or professions can be considered 'in the public interest' or in the interests of black people." Integrating lunch counters and integrating corporate boardrooms are equally honorable, if not equally remunerative. "Everything in this world belongs to black people," Jordan writes, "and there is much in this world." The civil rights movement gave blacks rights that white Americans had long taken for granted -- including the freedom to "listen to that voice inside that tells them what their honorable life's pursuit should be."

Jordan persuades. But while his argument lays compelling claim to one strand of the movement's legacy, there are others. Toward the end of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. insisted that "the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws -- racism, poverty, militarism and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It . . . suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced."

Jordan, having risen from working-class origins in the segregated South to the role of confidant to the nation's most powerful men, is in a unique position to address King's challenge. Given what Jordan tells us about his early civil rights career, it is reasonable to suspect that even in 1968 he might not have gone as far as King. That he could write a memoir in 2001 without even engaging King's critique is a testament to how much he, and America, have changed in the intervening 30 years.

LOAD-DATE: November 19, 2001

