

The Ticket That Might Have Been...

President Chisholm

By Gloria Steinem

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"I am a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. I make that statement proudly, in the full knowledge that, as a black person and as a female person, I do not have a chance of actually gaining that office in this election year. I make that statement seriously, knowing that my candidacy itself can change the face and future of American politics—that it will be important to the needs and hopes of every one of you—even though, in the conventional sense, I will not win."

— June 4, 1972

The election is over, and there will be a familiar face, a familiar white and male face, in the White House for four more years. The months of feverish work and hard-earned dollars that went into the Presidential candidacy of Shirley Chisholm are only memories now. Sometimes it seems that they are discussed seriously only when veterans of her campaign happen to get together and reminisce.

In fact, there is some uncertainty and even disappointment in those discussions, too. What effect did the Chisholm campaign have on the country? On the excluded groups it was meant to help and encourage? What ideas did it launch or lives did it change? And finally, the heart of all the questions: was it all worth it?

From reading the post-Convention and postelection [sic] reporting, it's impossible to tell. The Chisholm candidacy was rarely analyzed while it was going on, and even less so in traditional postmortems. Before and after the primaries, there were occasional tantalizing hints of Chisholm's significance. The Harris poll of last February, for instance, found the Congresswoman getting 35 percent of the vote among black Independents and black Democrats, and a support among woman of all races that was three times greater than her support among men. (From this, the Harris summary concluded, "Ms. Chisholm must now be considered a distinct threat to Mayor Lindsay, Senator McGovern, and former Senator Eugene McCarthy in vying for the liberal and left-of-center vote.")

Of course, Chisholm herself had stated her intention of "keeping the other candidates honest," of being one of the few forces pushing them to the left, not becoming a divisive [sic] force or a threat. But traditional analyses deal only with winning or losing in the traditional sense. Even Senator Hubert Humphrey was amazed by the showing Chisholm made in the Florida primary, and said often that, with a little money and organization, "she might have defeated us all." But neither of these clues to the significance or strength of the Chisholm campaign was pursued in deeper reports, or taken very seriously in the press. (In fact, air time for the major pre-primary speech quoted above was made available by court order under equal time provisions of the Federal Communications Commission, because of clear network failure to fairly cover the Chisholm candidacy.)

Perhaps the best indicator of her campaign's impact is the effect it had on individual lives. All over the country, there are people who will never be quite the same: farm women in Michigan who were inspired to work in a political campaign for the first time; Black Panthers in California who registered to vote, and encouraged other members of the black community to vote, too; children changed by the sight of a black woman saying, "I want to be President"; radical feminists

who found this campaign, like that of Linda Jenness in the Socialist Workers' Party, a possible way of changing the patriarchal system; and student or professional or "blue-collar" men who were simply impressed with a political figure who told the truth as she say it, no matter what the cost.

The Chisholm candidacy didn't forge a solid coalition of those people working for social change; that will take a long time. But it began one. If you listen to personal testimony from very diverse sources, it seems that the Chisholm candidacy was not in vain. In fact, the truth is that the American political scene may never quite be the same again.

Carolyn Reed, household worker New York City:

"In the beginning, I thought her candidacy was a joke. When I discussed it with a group of friends — some other black women who meet pretty regularly just to talk things over — a few of them were upset because Shirley hadn't let a black man run for Presidency first, or because she didn't go to the Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana to get their endorsement.

"But then we started to notice the total indifference of some black male leaders at the convention, and the kind of childish reaction of others who seemed to be whining, 'But why couldn't *I* be first?' We began to see the sense of what she was trying to do; to admire her for doing it as a black and as a woman; and to say to ourselves, 'Well, why *shouldn't* she be first?' The more we hashed it over, the more it made sense.

"If Shirley Chisholm had made it to the ballot in November, I would have voted for her."

John Lindsay, Mayor of New York City:

"Shirley Chisholm's candidacy shared with George McGovern's a great spirit of reform that distinguished the Democratic Convention's selection process in 1972. She gave voice to the aspirations of millions in a system that excludes women and minority groups from full expression and equal opportunity, not only in politics but also in the economic and social life of the nation.

"She also gave voice to the needs of this city and the great urban areas of our country. She was a fighter for change, and made me prouder than ever of our friendship."

Florynce Kennedy, lawyer, black activist, a founder of the National Organization for Women and the Feminist Party:

"The Chisholm candidacy not only freaked out the Establishment and the niggerizers, but it also confused and unsettled the niggers — and by niggers, I don't mean just the black niggers, but also the student niggers and the woman niggers and the poor niggers — plus a whole lot of other people who thought they were revolutionaries but discovered they couldn't dig her wig

"So what if she didn't win? If you've been lying on the ground with a truck on your ankle, you don't jump up and join the Olympics. The first step is to walk at all."

Mary Young Peacock, from Fort Lauderdale, Florida; self-described as "a white, middle-class, middle-aged American housewife":

"Most politicians seem to spend their time playing to so many different points of view — the Poles and the Czechs, the people for busing and antibusing — that they don't come out with anything realistic or sincere.

"The important thing about Chisholm's candidacy was that you believed whatever she said — it combined realism and idealism at the same time — and that's the combination I'm looking for. Shirley Chisholm has worked out in the world, not just gone from law school strait into politics. She's practical."

Osborn Elliott, editor of "Newsweek":

"I do believe the Chisholm campaign effectively raised the national consciousness on the issues of blacks and women. But what comes to mind when I think of her candidacy is the Convention. The absolutely top moment, the epitome of those days in Miami was her speech before the Black Caucus. The audience was rocking in the aisles. I remember her explaining why she had chosen to run, and using a phrase over and over again. Something like, 'I did this because I had the courage to do it. I did this because I had the guts to do it. I did this because I was the only one who had the *balls* to do it.'

"Marvelous."

Marjorie Thomas, executive assistant in a black-run community development corporation, Brooklyn, New York:

"I'm from her community, and for a local black female legislator to gain recognition nationally, and I guess internationally — that's something to be proud of. She's beautiful people.

"I remember being surprised when she first ran against James Farmer in this Congressional District. She wasn't well known, and Farmer was, but when she campaigned in the streets, people really listened. She spoke Spanish fluently, which meant a lot to the Puerto Rican community. There was something very special about her even then when she was a nobody; something that made people stop and listen."

Adolfo G. Alayon, executive director of the Consumer Action Program of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York:

"For me, the prime outcome of the Chisholm campaign was that it focused the limelight on this district, with our issues, problems, and needs magnified for the whole nation to see. Our consumer group is Puerto Rican oriented, and she is its staunchest supporter. When you have a problem, you can always get hold of her or someone on her staff. And they don't just talk, they actually do something to help.

"I'll always credit Shirley with one thing — she truly represents the disenfranchised. She really cares about making life better for all people."

Bob Denby and Tom Werner, documentary filmmakers who followed Chisholm during the Presidential campaign:

"When we traveled with Chisholm for six months, we met many people who didn't take the whole thing seriously. But being with her almost constantly allowed us to see that she herself was quite serious. Without much money and with the media against her, she still stuck it out.

"Her campaign was the beginning of an important coalition. It gave inspiration to people as seemingly divergent in their goals as poor whites, Black Panthers, and progressive women's groups."

Sheila Tobias, associate provost, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut:

"I don't think I'll ever forget the excitement of seeing the first bumper sticker — FOLLOW THE CHISHOLM TRAIL. Having female candidates for President and Vice-President in the same year says something about the size and importance of the constituency.

"We're moving, we're getting very close. And soon we'll be there."

Fannie Lou Hamer, political leader of Sunflower County, Mississippi, and a founder of the National Women's Political Caucus:

"I felt good when I had a chance to vote for Chisholm on her first ballot at the Democratic Convention. Men couldn't have talked about the real issues in this country the way she did. They bow to political pressure, but Chisholm didn't bow to anyone.

"She's a great person, a black person, and a great woman, and she's working for the kinds of change that the National Women's Political Caucus is working for. With the woman's vote and

the youth vote — far more than 50 percent — we can have a candidate like Chisholm in the White House one day."

Gabrielle Burton, feminist author of "I'm Running Away from Home, but I'm Not Allowed To Cross the Street," and the only Chisholm delegate to run in Montgomery County, Maryland:

"Chisholm tried to do a dangerous thing — to offer a voice to the mute. Much of the powerless segment declined to use that voice. Some of her initial supporters became piranhas, rejecting her when she didn't perform the impossible immediately. Chisholm is honest, incorruptible, and a woman. We weren't ready for such deviance. Perhaps we'll never be ready for Chisholm, but at the very least she smoothed the road for the next female Presidential candidate. Such a possibility is no longer an automatic knee-slapper."

Arlie Scott, statewide coordinator of the Chisholm campaign in California:

"Chisholm received almost 155,000 votes, almost 5 percent of the total, on a seven-month budget of \$50,000.

"There were many firsts: the campaign was totally run by nonprofessionals, blacks and women, young people and students, who had never been in politics before; a woman coordinated a statewide campaign for the first time; and thousands of people, who never would have had the chance to try with a male candidate, learned they *could* run a campaign.

"For instance, during one lunch meeting, I had to plan campaign strategy with Bobby Seale and Aileen Hernandez. That's a coalition!"

Robert Cohn, Hollywood movie producer:

"I voted for Chisholm because she said what nobody else would say — not just issues like Vietnam and tax reform, but the tough and honest truths about the rights of people.

"Since the Convention, I've been disappointed that her voice hasn't been louder and stronger. Now that the election is over, we need her and others to become part of the loyal opposition. That's an institution in other countries, but here, the opposition has no traditional platform.

"We've got to start a war chest to pay for television time and literature. We have to create a platform, an alternative source of information and ideas. Shirley Chisholm could be an important part of that."

Tom Wicker, columnist, The New York "Times" [sic]:

"What was most significant about the Chisholm candidacy was not its achievement in an objective political sense. The greater significance was this: a lot of men didn't like the idea that Shirley Chisholm was running, but she did it anyway. A lot of men wanted her to do certain things with her candidacy once she had declared, but she refused that, too.

"A woman leaped into the Presidential politics of a major party for the first time, and did what she thought was right — without regard for what the male leaders thought she should do. If I were a woman, I would be very encouraged by that."

Gina Belafonte, age ten, daughter of Harry and Julie Robinson Belafonte, and a Chisholm campaign worker:

"Next time, I'm going to run for the Presidency. I have seven delegates already."

— GLORIA STEINEM