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Jimmy Carter: A Black Perspective (Community Columnist)

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COMMUNITY COLUMNIST

In 1968, Republican Richard Nixon was elected as the president of the United States. During the '60s, nearly a decade of major civil rights gains and legislation occurred: the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Also in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. His death sent the Civil Rights Movement into a tailspin and sent his close and trusted advisors all asunder. Nixon was reelected in 1972, but forced to resign in 1974. Let's reflect on 1972.

In April 1972, Black leadership held the historic - and major - National Black Political Conference in Gary, Indiana. It was hosted by a groundbreaking Black mayor: Richard Hatcher. Out of that conference came a series of major elements: a manifesto called the "Gary Declaration," a strong commitment from most of the major national political leadership that the time for action was "now." At that juncture in history, there was a resolve to activate Black political power throughout the country. That convention should be noted as a major event in the history of Black politics in America.

Also, in 1972, Nixon was re-elected, African American Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm became the first Black in modern times to run for U.S. president. Also, South Dakota Sen. George McGovern ran for the presidency. (Side note: The governor of Georgia was Jimmy Carter and, Andrew Young, a close advisor to King, Jr., was left without a mission or direction.)

A little-known fact, and not recorded historically, is the perspective that you have a liberal Democrat running for president, and a Black woman as well. Which presented a potentially troubling dynamic for the Democratic Party, not knowing the direction Black voters might take. But the potential was that the Black vote could be split, between McGovern and Chisholm, to the detriment of the Democrats in the 1972 presidential race. It should be mentioned that Atlanta was the hub of the Civil Rights Movement, and it was populated by King Jr.'s father, and the directionless Young. Young decided to run for Congress. I remind you this all happened in 1972.

King, Jr.'s father appealed to McGovern to support the candidacy of Andrew Young, running for Congress out of Georgia, and, in return, he promised to galvanize much of the Black vote for McGovern, as opposed to Chisholm. That deal was agreed to. Chisholm's presidential aspirations were not successful. Young was elected to Congress, but McGovern was defeated by the re-elected Nixon. Carter was very close to the Black community in Georgia and was the governor.

In 1974, Nixon resigned from the presidency in the wake of Watergate, and Gerald Ford became the President. Young was reelected in 1974 and 1976.

In 1976, Carter ran for - and was elected - president. Some felt that was a result of America's reaction to the corruptness of the Republican administration of Nixon. In 1976, Black people all over the country voted heavily for Carter at an estimated 90%. It thought that it was the highest Black vote in history up to that point. That it was partly a residual of the 1972 Black Political Convention in Gary. After being elected president, Carter called on his old friend from Atlanta, Young, to be the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

A series of unfortunate, historical events, including the firing of Young and an American hostage situation - where a group of Americans were held hostage by Iran and a failed attempt to rescue them - all continued to weaken Carter's presidency and his reelection in 1980, against candidate Ronald Reagan. Enter on the Atlanta scene, **Preston Love, Jr.**, who worked on what became the successful campaign for Young to become mayor of Atlanta. I was a major participant in his campaign and was one of the three people who he appointed to run a department once he was elected.

Carter returned home to Georgia to build his presidential library. Young's race for mayor was negatively impacted by his support of Carter's presidential library, which was very controversial in the Atlanta area. It nearly cost Young his victory for mayor.

By 1983, the continued impact of the 1972 Black Political Summit was manifested in the gigantic - and historic - victory of Harold Washington, as the first Black mayor of Chicago. I played a significant role. The political impact of Washington's victory was enormous. That victory was followed by another historical political and leadership meeting, again hosted by Mayor Richard Hatcher. The agenda of the meeting was that if Blacks could win Chicago, then it was possible for Blacks to have a successful run for president. It was unanimous that it could - and should - happen, but none of the major Black political leaders held up their hands. I would mention just a few who could have: Dave Dinkins of New York, former mayor of Atlanta Maynard Jackson, Detroit mayor Coleman Young, Hatcher, and Young. And I repeat, no one raised their hand.

After the Black leadership meeting in 1983, the Rev. Jesse Jackson decided to test the waters. Re-enter **Preston Love, Jr.** Because of Jackson's relationship with Young, my presence in his administration and my newly found political reputation, Jackson asked me to take a leave of absence from Young and work with him during his presidential exploratory journey. I accepted.

At that point, I was Jackson's only staff member. Late in the summer of 1983, while Jackson and I traveled the southern sector registering Black voters and urging them to vote, we visited Carter at his home in Plains, Georgia. I remember so well what gracious hosts the president and his wife, Rosalyn, were to Jackson and me. He was insightful, and had a historic perspective of the presidency. about the pitfalls and the realities of doing such. After meeting with him, I felt a tremendous like and respect for the man. We also had a short, but exciting, tour of the complex and a quick course in farming peanuts.

While Carter encouraged Jackson to pursue a run for president, he was very clear and forthright. I mourn the fact that he, to this date, has not received his due. Not only as president, but for his post-presidential service, and for his interactions and relationships with the Black community.

Preston Love Jr. is a longtime Omaha civic engagement activist who also teaches black studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. These views do not represent those of UNO.