

The Splendid and the Vile

Leadership Lessons from Maynard Jackson

Wendy Jackson

The Splendid and the Vile is both a title and a lens, capturing the radical duality of Maynard Jackson's life and leadership. A man of grand vision, he was often admired as splendid and dismissed as vile by those threatened by his determination to reshape power. But Jackson wasn't merely an elected official; he was a political architect who transformed what public office could accomplish. From airport terminals to public contracts, from community investment to civic inclusion, he didn't lead for vanity, but for equity. His leadership insisted on fairness, not as charity, but as justice. As he famously said, politics remained the last viable means of nonviolent social change for Black Americans.

Maynard Jackson's rise wasn't an anomaly—it was a fulfillment of purpose rooted in legacy and prepared through struggle. He came from a lineage of civic giants and cultural trailblazers: a father who held a PhD and registered Black voters in the segregated South; a mother who earned the first PhD awarded to a Black Georgian by a French university; a grandfather who served as national vice president of the NAACP and shaped the Sweet Auburn district into a center of Black political power. Jackson's pedigree wasn't just elite—it was revolutionary. He didn't walk through open doors; he built new ones for others to enter.

His story also parallels Atlanta's own transformation: from a Civil War battleground to the beating heart of the New South. Born out of transportation infrastructure and reborn from literal ashes, Atlanta became a city of dual forces. Black excellence flourishing through HBCUs and civic networks, and white economic ambition rebranding the South through industrial growth and regional pride. These forces didn't always align, but their coexistence defined the city's unique tension. Jackson not only knew that history, he was shaped by it.

His early life reflects that same balance of brilliance and burden. Graduating from high school at 14 and college at 18, Jackson experienced early achievement and early heartbreak, losing his father at 15. A brief academic stumble humbled him, but instead of shortcuts, he chose the long road: selling encyclopedias, working farms, earning his law degree with honors. That humility, paired with resolve, became foundational to the way he led—not as a man above others, but as someone forged by discipline, tradition, and an unshakable belief in justice.

13 Lessons From Maynard Jackson

Courage is a muscle—use it or lose it. Maynard Jackson's early run for U.S. Senate at just 30 years old—without even telling his wife—revealed his deep conviction that courage doesn't begin with victory; it begins with risk. Facing Herman Talmadge, one of the South's most entrenched segregationists, Jackson lost the election but carried the city of Atlanta, signaling a shift in political tides. He didn't wait for perfect conditions or consensus; he showed up, challenged the status quo, and acted boldly. His refusal to delay leadership until conditions were ideal teaches us that courage doesn't grow from triumph but from the willingness to face loss with purpose. Maynard didn't just talk about bravery—he embodied it.

Power means nothing if you don't use it to uplift others. Jackson didn't pursue power for its own sake. He saw it as a tool to make government more inclusive and equitable. From mandating diversity in hiring and public contracts to establishing training programs for women and minority contractors, Jackson institutionalized fairness. He didn't just advocate for representation—he demanded it. He viewed the seat at the table not as a trophy, but as a responsibility to expand access and raise others up. His leadership asked a pointed question: Are you using your influence to protect comfort or to multiply justice?

Legacy is not what you build—it's what you leave behind. Jackson's impact didn't end when he left office. By creating policies that outlasted his administration, he ensured that fairness and representation weren't passing ideals but structural norms. He mentored future leaders, diversified city leadership, and empowered marginalized communities. His legacy was not defined by being the first Black mayor, but by making sure he wouldn't be the last. He lit a path for others and handed off the torch, reminding us that true leadership is measured by the momentum it creates after you're gone.

Strategy is what you do when the money is gone. When federal cuts under Reagan gutted urban programs, Jackson didn't shrink the city's vision—he expanded it. While others slashed budgets, Jackson built infrastructure, jobs, and a resilient middle class. He turned adversity into leverage and made Atlanta the only major city to grow economically and demographically in that era. For Jackson, strategy meant finding opportunity in constraints and building when others retreated.

Real leaders build with women—not just for them. Long before 'diversity and inclusion' were corporate catchphrases, Jackson embedded them into Atlanta's leadership. He placed women in high-level roles not as tokens but as vital partners in progress. Shirley Franklin, who later became the first Black female mayor of a major Southern city, rose under Jackson's leadership. He respected women's voices and power, both publicly and privately, creating a governance model that viewed women as indispensable to civic success.

The measure of a leader is how they show up in crisis. During the Atlanta Child Murders, when many turned away, Jackson turned up. He lived among the grieving communities, launched coordinated task forces, and refused to let the nation ignore Black suffering. His leadership was not abstract—it was embodied. He showed up in neighborhoods, offered comfort, demanded action, and bore the emotional weight of a city in pain. Leadership, he proved, is defined not by how you lead in good times, but how you carry people through the worst.

Love your city like it's your kin. Jackson governed Atlanta not as a detached official, but as a devoted guardian. He reimagined downtown spaces for all residents, invested in public art, and believed the city belonged as much to families and workers as to executives and developers. His love wasn't performative; it was transformative. It moved policies, reshaped institutions, and invited citizens to believe in what their city could become. He didn't coddle Atlanta—he challenged it, like family.

Be unapologetically yourself. One of the most revolutionary things Maynard Jackson ever did was refuse to shrink himself. He didn't dilute his Blackness or change his voice to make others comfortable. At 6'4" and over 300 pounds, he filled a room with presence and principle. He knew that advocating for equity wasn't exclusion—it was overdue fairness. He didn't believe in leading by assimilation but by authenticity, showing that real leadership integrates identity, not erases it.

Legacy is the work you don't live to see. Today's Atlanta—with its diverse Chamber of Commerce and leadership spanning gender and race—is the living continuation of Jackson's vision. His procurement policies and inclusion mandates built a platform that others have risen from. He left behind more than buildings; he left behind belief. The true impact of leadership isn't always visible in one lifetime—but it shapes the next.

Equity is not charity—it's smart economics. When less than 1% of Atlanta's contracts were going to Black businesses in a city that was half Black, Jackson didn't just protest—he rewrote the rules. Equity wasn't a favor; it was fiscal sense. Circulating capital through underserved communities meant stronger neighborhoods, broader wealth, and a more resilient economy. He proved that justice and growth are not at odds—they're inseparable.

Real leaders don't just empower women—they recognize their power. Jackson didn't see women as an obligation—he saw them as partners. When a young Stacey Abrams challenged him, he didn't dismiss her—he called her college president, learned who she was, and gave her a start in public service. He wasn't threatened by rising talent; he cultivated it. He didn't shape the next generation to serve his image. He elevated them to shape their own.

You don't just build cities—you build people. Jackson knew that steel and stone don't sustain a city—people do. Programs fade, buildings weather, policies get reversed—but the way you invest in people endures. He mentored future leaders, listened deeply, and believed in others' potential, often before they believed in it themselves. That human investment was his most enduring legacy.

A leader's final day isn't an ending—it's a message. Jackson died at 65, still in motion, still serving, still working on behalf of his city. He didn't retire into comfort—he stayed in the fight. His life teaches us that leadership is not a title, but a posture of commitment to the very end. His passing wasn't a conclusion—it was a reminder. That we are meant to lead with conviction, build with purpose, and never stop serving.

So what will we do with the torch he left us? Maynard was not perfect—he could be fierce, stubborn, and unrelenting—but he led with truth, with strategy, and with fire. He faced injustice, economic drought, and unimaginable grief, and through it all, he never forgot who he was fighting for. He wasn't bred for achievement; he was bred for assignment. And because of that, Atlanta—and this nation—stood taller. His life reminds us that legacy isn't about being the first. It's about making sure you're not the last. So whether you lead a company, a classroom, a congregation, or a community, ask yourself: What are you building? Who are you lifting? And will the people you serve stand taller because you led? Maynard didn't just lead a city—he led a movement. Now it's our turn.