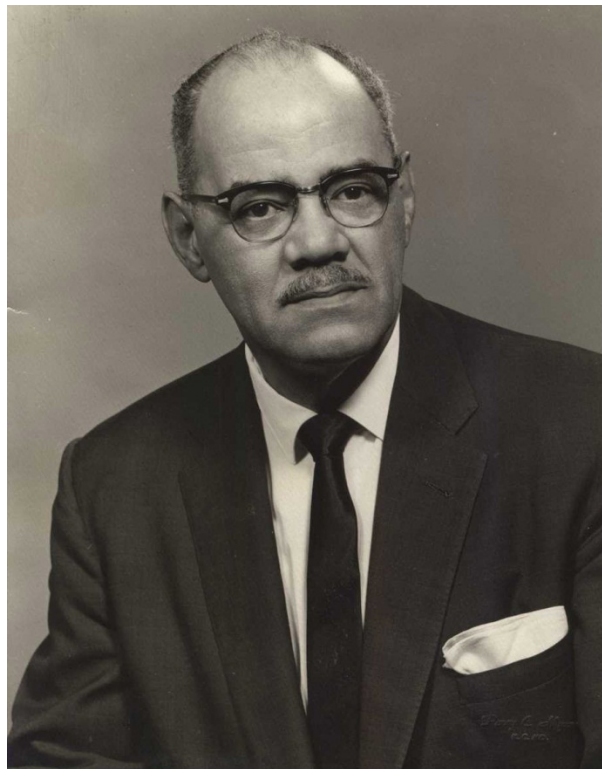


XIII

Sudden Death and an Explosion of Recognition

July 14, 1970, the last day of Leon Jordan's life, began like any other day at the Jordan home, but his activities that day remind us of some of the most prominent threads in the canvas of the later years of his life. He left for the Green Duck after lunch. That afternoon he called his lifelong friend, Lucile Bluford, to tell her he had a call from Fred Dobbs, a retired Captain of the Kansas City Police Department. Dobbs was now living in Compton, California, where he ran a newspaper, but he called to wish



Jordan luck in his campaign against Lee Bohannon. Dobbs had called Bluford two months earlier when he saw Jordan's name in a press release and asked her to say hello to Jordan for him.

Orchid joined Leon at the Green Duck in the evening. She went to the second floor where she usually worked on their accounts. But shortly before 7 p.m. an old friend from the past arrived at Kansas City's airport. Ethalyn Gordon, who in the early forties married Joe Stevenson, who in turn grew up with Leon and went to school with him, arrived from Detroit and called EvEssey Spivey, commonly referred to as Joe's sister, but in reality Joe's sister-in-law, to let her know she would be in town for a few days. EvEssey and her husband owned the Black

Hawk tavern, where Ethalyn Gordon reached her, and where Ethalyn was then invited to come. There is a photo of Ethalyn as a very attractive young woman in the Jordan Collection with an inscription that reads, “Sister Orchid, Luck and Success Always, Lil Sis.”

In spite of the inscription being addressed to her, Orchid described Ethalyn as a closer friend to her husband than to her.

Ethalyn and Joe Stevenson are the dance couple who worked at the Chez Paris that Jackie Rhodes remembers visiting when she sometimes rode with Jordan and



Cliff Warren. Ethalyn and Joe separated and divorced in the early 50's, but remained good friends, visiting each other when they were in the same city. And Ethalyn remained close to Joe's sister-in-law, EvEssey, who found nothing unusual in Ethalyn's plans to stay with her once arriving in Kansas City.

At the Black Hawk, Ethalyn called her former husband to let him know she was in town and invited him to come by the Black Hawk. Joe quickly agreed and just before 9 p.m. walked over to the Green Duck to see if he could pick up a ride to the Black Hawk. He found Leon working on a sliding door in the liquor store adjacent to the tavern. He kidded Leon about trying to be a carpenter. He told Leon he had a phone call from Ethalyn. At first Leon thought she had called from Los Angeles, and responded that he too recently had a call from Los Angeles. Leon referred to his call from Dobbs.

Joe then made it clear that Ethalyn called from in town and would be at the Black Hawk until the Spiveys closed the tavern at ten. Leon was surprised and delighted. Joe then walked over to the bar to chat with the bar maid, Katherine Parker, hoping that he and Leon would drive over to the Black Hawk before ten.¹⁰⁵ But just before ten, a white male, obviously known to Leon but not to Joe, came in and sat down with Leon.

The white male Stevenson saw was Robert D. Kingsland, a registered lobbyist, former prosecuting attorney of St. Louis County, and assistant attorney general under Senator Thomas Eagleton. He came with a check from Charles Herman, Vice-President of General Standards, Inc., a liquor distributor in Kansas City, Missouri. Kingsland said they discussed Jordan's political campaign and Jordan told him he was having great success in developing young leaders in Freedom to the distress of his opponents. He also told Kingsland that Bohannon was getting considerable money, probably from True Davis, to fight Lt. Governor Morris. After hearing of Jordan's death, Herman stopped payment on his check causing Orchid to be suspicious. She reported the matter to the police. She was unaware of the original purpose of the check.

Kingsland remembers being the only white person in the Green Duck, but he also remembers being introduced to a representative of the UAW, who wore glasses, named Ivory, and to an M. D. whose name he couldn't remember, but who almost certainly was Dr. Mark Bryant, Coroner of Jackson County. Leon later told Irene Smith that he had spoken with Bryant that night. Kingsland also talked briefly with Orchid. Gussie Mimms remembers that Jordan's long conversation with Kingsland delayed their usual weekday early closing time.

Kingsland wasn't the only white person at the Green Duck that night. Sergeant Charles Barnes from the Kansas City Police Department also stopped by to talk to Jordan. Jordan

¹⁰⁵ Interviews of Ethalyn Anita Gordon, July 27, Joseph Ira Stevenson, VeEssey Spivey, and Katherine Parker, July 28, and Orchid Jordan, August 7, 1970, KCPD files, LJC.

expressed concern about the “black mafia” that he felt responsible for recent bank robberies and other illegal activities. The FBI had raided the homes of Gene Richardson, Doc Dearborn, and Eddie Cox by this time, and the immediate results of the raid was published in the newspaper, but it had not yet published its detailed report of the burgeoning “black mafia.” Barnes rode with the Jordans when Leon took Orchid home shortly after midnight. Leon left Orchid with the thought he would be home soon to share ice cream with her.¹⁰⁶

Joe Stevenson stayed at the Green Duck drinking three or four vodkas until about midnight when George Meadows, a former bartender, offered to drive him home. Meanwhile Ethalyn had gone to bed chatting with EvEssey Spivey. Sometime after midnight she asked her host when she had last heard from Leon. EvEssey replied that he was probably still at the Green Duck. So Ethalyn called there. Katherine Parker took the call and told Ethalyn, Jordan was just checking out. Ethalyn identified herself as Ethel Gordon from California, and when Leon heard this he immediately took the call telling Katherine that Ethel was Joe Stevenson’s ex-wife. He asked how long she had been in town and after an extended jovial conversation asked what she was drinking. She told him “Hennessys” and he said he would bring a bottle and stop by to see her. Gussie Mimms, who ran the liquor store attached to the Green Duck, remembers Gordon suggesting she would drop by the Green Duck, but Leon responding, “Oh Hell, we’re closed—I’ll drop you one by.” Mimms packaged a bottle of Hennessey cognac and two bottles of sweet soda at Jordan’s request.

Gussie Mimms had been with Jordan many years and knew those who walked in and out of the Green Duck about as well as anyone. Fezell Vernell, Irene Smith’s former husband, would come to see Mimms when Jordan wasn’t there. But Mimms denied to police knowing any girl friends Jordan might have. After making up the package, Mimms left with Parker about

¹⁰⁶ Statements by Robert D. Kingsland, August 6, and Charles Barnes, July 15, 1970, KCPD files, LJC.

12:45 or 12:50 a.m. It was the night of the All Star Major League Baseball Game. Mimms remembers the street being surprisingly quiet when she left. She guessed that after the game everybody had gone to sleep. She did remember, however, seeing a lone boy, about thirteen years old riding by fast on a bicycle. That sighting gave credence to a young boy's story that he witnessed Jordan's murder and could identify the killers.

After finishing his conversation with Gordon, Leon called Irene Smith and told her he was going home to eat ice cream with Orchid. Orchid left a hand-written note among other memorabilia at the Bruce Watkins Cultural Center that read: "Met in Topeka, Kans—On playground went to get ice cream cone and came to ask if anyone would like a lick. The nite of his death I was waiting for him to come home to eat ice cream with me."¹⁰⁷

Kenneth Irvin was the night clean-up man at the Green Duck. He arrived that evening about 11:45 p.m. and began stocking shelves. After Parker and Mimms went home, Irvin was left alone with Jordan. It was customary for Jordan to lock Irvin in the tavern when he left. Shortly after 1 a.m., Jordan said, "See you in the morning, Kenny," took his package of cognac and Vess soda and locked the door behind him.

In the back of the bar, Irvin heard a blast. As he walked to the front of the bar, he heard a second and thought perhaps a third. When the police interviewed Irvin immediately after the shooting, he denied seeing any details of the crime except Jordan lying in front of the tavern. However, after a lie detector test indicating that he wasn't being completely truthful, he then testified that "When I got to the window, I looked out and saw Mr. Jordan lying in the street by his car. At that time I saw a negro man who has bushy hair, what they call an Afro, but it wasn't a great big one. This man was dressed in a dark colored suit and it looked like his shirt was

¹⁰⁷ Interviews of Gussie Mimms, July 15, Ethalyn Anita Gordon, July 27, Joseph Ira Stevenson, Ve Essey Spivey, and Katherine Parker, July 28, 1970, KCPD files, LJC; Orchid Jordan's handwritten note, Archives, Bruce Watkins Cultural Center, copy, LJC.

lighter than his suit. This man looked like to me that he was stocky build, and was a little taller than I am, and I am five feet—five inches tall. I know he wasn't six feet tall. . . .I would guess this man to be between 35 and 40 years old, and he didn't appear to me to be a jitterbug, which I mean a younger boy with all the fancy clothes. This man was facing Mr. Jordan, who was lying in the street, and he was holding a long barreled gun, which could have been a shot gun and might have been a pump-type shot gun. Just as I looked out the window of the tavern, and saw this man from the window and ran to the phone to call the police. As I was dialing the phone to call the police, I heard a car speeding away and it sounded to me like it was going west on 26th Street. Shortly after this the police came and also Gussie Mimms, the barmaid, who unlocked the door of the tavern and let me out.” Months later Irvin would change his story again, eventually providing more incriminating details leading to the indictments of James A. Willis, Doc Dearborn, and Maynard Cooper.¹⁰⁸

After locking the tavern door, Jordan habitually drew his 38 calibre pistol from its holster behind his back as he walked toward his car always parked in the same spot. He also had keys and packaged cognac in his hand. Just after he neared his car and placed his pistol in his right pocket a shotgun blast fired from a car slowly moving south on Prospect crumpled him to the pavement, keys flying. The first shot came after Jordan pocketed his pistol. That suggests his ambushers had watched him carefully and knew his habits. The car carrying three men stopped. One got out and fired two more blasts into Jordan's prone body. After the man returned to the car, the car turned the corner and sped east on 26th Street. The pellets found in Jordan's body were OO shot, the heaviest used in shotguns. At least two shots were fired from such close range the wadding from the shells was found in his wounds.

¹⁰⁸ *Kansas City Call*, July 17, 1970; Interviews of Kenneth Irvin, July 15, 1970, July 23, 1970 and July 27, 1970, KCPD file, LJC.

The blasts were heard at the fire station just up the street at 2534 Prospect. The fire captain and two fire fighters were quickly on the scene with a resuscitator, but to no avail. The police response was also swift. Police arrived at 1:17 a.m. to find the firefighters at work. Gussie Mimms and Orchid Jordan were there even before the police. Mimms had no sooner walked into her home than she received Irvin's call. She rushed back to the Green Duck to find Orchid cradling Leon's head in her lap. She unlocked Irvin from the tavern. Leon was then quickly moved to Research Hospital at Orchid's request. But it was too late. The firefighters had never discovered a pulse. He was pronounced DOA. Dr. Mark Bryant, who had visited Leon earlier in the evening, made the official declaration as coroner.

All of Leon's belongings found at the scene were identified by Orchid. As a former police officer, Leon carried a 38 calibre blue steel pistol for self protection. That was now in his pocket. Money, credit cards, etc. all were found. This was not a robbery, but an assassination. The package



containing the cognac and the Vess soda was at first a puzzle. Orchid claimed it was not her husband's. That was not his drink. But Gussie Mimms apparently cleared that up.

After Bryant's official ruling, Leon's body was sent to General Hospital, and Orchid went home where several friends had gathered, including the leaders of Freedom. Orchid's

brother Harvey Ramsey was also there. The investigating officer quickly realized this was not the best scene for asking questions and cut her visit short. 109

THE KANSAS CITY STAR MAIN EDITION
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LEON JORDAN IS SLAIN

Three Blasts From Assassin's Shotgun Kill One of the City's Most Powerful Negro Political Leaders—Attack Occurs in Front of His Tavern at 2548 Prospect

HUNT FOR 3 KILLERS

Metro Squad Takes Up Investigation Into Murder of the State Representative and Co-Founder of Freedom, Inc., Political Group

The Metro squad today began an intensive investigation into the shotgun slaying of Rep. Leon M. Jordan (D-Kansas City), president of Freedom, Inc., a major Jackson County political organization.

Jordan, 65 years old, was struck by three blasts of 00 buckshot early today as he left the Green Duck tavern, 2548 Prospect avenue, which he owned and operated. He died instantly.

At the Metro square swung into action, police already had issued a pick-up order for a 1969 brown-colored Pontiac car occupied by three Negro men.

Witnesses told police the car with two men in the front seat and one in the rear passed the scene at the instant Jordan was shot. The murder occurred at 1:18 o'clock today when Jordan was walking from the front door of his tavern to his car parked nearby.

With Babes Back
The victim's wife, Mrs. Orville I. Jordan, and a friend had preceded Jordan out of the tavern by about five minutes and had driven in another car to the scene. They returned to the scene immediately.

The ambush slaying triggered waves of shock through Kansas City and Jackson County politics. Jordan, one of the most powerful Negro leaders in the state's history, was a candidate for a fourth term in the Missouri General Assembly. He first was elected in 1964, three years after he had driven in another car to the scene. He was a leading political figure in the Democratic primary, Jordan was opposed by Lee Robinson, who helped form the Black Youth of America organization here. The murder leaves Robinson, 51, unopposed in the primary and there is no Republican candidate for the office.

Police said Jordan was struck three times by shotgun blasts as he neared his car.

Killer Got Close
Dr. William Bryan, Jackson County coroner, who examined the body at the General hospital, said Jordan was struck in the chest, the left knee and the right hip. The shots were fired at such close range, the examination disclosed, that wadding from the shells was found in the wounds and on Jordan's car.

Firemen in station house No. 18 at 2534 Prospect avenue were among those who heard the shots and investigated. At first they could see nothing beyond Jordan's body which was hidden from their view by his car.

After a crowd began gathering, (Continued on page 1B)

State Felt His Power
By Henry Clay Gold
The slaying of Congressman Leon Jordan, whose death today stunned Missouri officials and political leaders, often was hailed as the Democratic party's most effective warden election day.

Jordan reached his peak in state politics in 1966 in the contest for United States senator and governor.

In the senatorial contest, the support of Jordan and his political organization, Freedom, Inc., was strongly sought in the Democratic primary election by former Sen. Edward V. Rostenkowski, Edward V. Long, Thomas F. Eagleton and Tom Davis. Davis was running the hard-fought campaign and Long had voted in the Senate for eight years for all civil rights causes.

Jordan, in making one of his most difficult decisions, joined other leaders of Freedom, Inc., in announcing support of that organization for Eagleton who won the 3-way primary fight for the Democratic nomination and who carried the election.

In addition to his election-day work for Eagleton, Jordan had announced his decision early enough to have an impact on those politicians who traditionally stand back while waiting for a winner to emerge.

The Green Duck tavern was the frequent scene of top-level political discussions. Candidates for offices ranging from the United States Senate to committee posts used there to seek support from Jordan.

Gov. Warren E. Hearnes, on learning of the death of Jordan today, said "a leader of people has been taken from us." (Continued on page 2B)

On Inside Pages
The Kansas City Chiefs-College All-Star football game, scheduled for July 31 in Chicago, remains in jeopardy. In the latest development, the All-Stars issue, through the National Football League Players association, a statement declaring they will discontinue supervised practices, Otto Graham prompt talks with the Chicago Tribune Charities, sponsors of the game, as to the status of the match. Page 1B.

A senator plans hearings into the 5,000 bombings that

LOSE A LEADER
Black Political Group Badly Hurt by Jordan's Murder
By Robert P. Sigman
Within hours after Rep. Leon M. Jordan was killed by assassins early today, his co-leaders moved to fill the void left by the death of the president of Freedom, Inc., the major black political organization in Kansas City.

Pressed by the closeness of the August 4 primary, Bruce R. Watkins, circuit clerk, and Rep. Harold L. Holiday (D-Kansas City), confederated at length and then talked with candidates and politicians outside the group. Commitments made in the election by Jordan and the group will "remain in place," Holiday said.

A Militant Remains
Jordan's death left only Lee A. Robinson, a young black activist, in the Democratic primary race for Jordan's 11th district seat in the Missouri House of Representatives. No Republican filed in the district.

"There is a statute that provides when an incumbent stands for re-election after, the 15 days can be opened for five days," Holiday pointed out.

In Jefferson City, James Kirkpatrick, Missouri secretary of state, said the law applies to both political parties.

Rare Is Open
Filings will open in his office in the Missouri Capitol at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning and will continue Friday, Saturday, Monday and Tuesday. The closing deadline will be 5:30 o'clock Tuesday afternoon, Kirkpatrick said.

Frank Martin, chief clerk of the Kansas City Election board, said the primary ballots were now being printed and it would not be possible for Jordan's name to be removed. His name can be covered, however.

Mrs. Bernice Onley, Jackson County clerk, said filings for the committee post in the 15th ward will be reopened tomorrow. Robinson and another candidate are filed.

Mrs. Onley said the county committee election falls under the same provisions that apply to state legislative races in event of an incumbent's death.

"This is not going to destroy Freedom, Inc.," Holiday said of the slaying. "In fact, it gives us added incentive to do the job we were trying to do."

Jordan, who was considered the top leader of the organization, handled many of the political details, such as recruiting workers and getting the vote out on election day, as well as negotiating with politicians outside the group.

Watkins worked closely with Jordan in co-ordinating campaign activities.

"Bruce is pretty well briefed on all the commitments," Holiday explained.

See Bigger Group
"I think he will move on into step into Leon's position. In all probability our leadership will be broadened and represented by larger numbers of people."

Although Holiday said it was not the proper time to go into political details, preliminary thinking is that Jordan's wife, (Continued on page 1B)

Mayor & Council
See page 1B.

SHARP STRIKE AT ENEMY
South Vietnamese Troops Undertake a Major New Offensive With the Aim of Destroying Base Camps of Foe in Jungle Terrain West of Da Nang

AIDED BY U. S.
Marine 'Copiers Land Assault Forces, American Advisers

War's End a Key To Campus Peace
Washington (AP)—A presidential commission aimed at pacifying the nation's campuses was told today it will not succeed until the Vietnam war ends.

"It may well be," said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), "that the only line in the commission's report that will have any real meaning for our colleges and universities is the line that reads: 'This war must end.'"

Kennedy and Hugh Scott, Senate Republican leader were among the six witnesses called at the first hearing of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest.

The others: S. I. Hayakawa, San Francisco state college President, Robben Fleming, University of Michigan president, Charles Palmer, National Student Association president and Otis Cochrane, president of the Black American Law Student union.

Scott declared, "We must retreat from demagoguery in all its scelerous formulation. It is time to show each other our humanity, our human goodness."

"Student awareness does this generation credit, as does their idealism. Their anger at the system, the establishment, is evidence of this awareness."

The commission, headed by William W. Scrantom, former Republican governor of Pennsylvania, was named a month ago by President Nixon in the wake of campus uprisings that followed the U. S. move into Cambodia.

Spared especially by the shooting deaths of four students at Kent State university in Ohio and two youths at Jackson State college in Mississippi, Nixon asked the panel for full recommendations by October 1.

Palmer, who represents student governments at about 500 campuses said:

"Many students see this commission as a possible vehicle for change, but believe your recommendations will be only superficially followed and that your report will join the Kerensky and Eisenhower Commissions' statements on some dusty shelves."

A presidential commission headed by former Illinois (Continued on Page 2A)

Hanoi Silence: A Call for Peace?
The National-World Editor The Star has just returned from Southeast Asia where he spent six weeks in Cambodia and Vietnam. It was his fifth reporting assignment in the area since 1962.

ROOFS NOT ON
Exposure to Weather Will Prevent Work This Winter

By Roger Moore
(A member of the Press Staff)

The construction strike has delayed the opening of Kansas City International airport at least until the spring of 1972, Joe E. Howard, airport development director, said today.

Howard made the statement to Councilman J. D. Robins and Richard L. Berkeley at a city council aviation committee meeting at the City hall.

"The labor and weather conditions the city has experienced during its construction period of the airport has not painted a very bright picture for an early opening date," Howard said.

Delays in Roofing
He said the primary reason for the most recent projected delay was that the construction strike has prohibited the finishing of the concrete roofs of the six, high terminal in the air.

11 midnight 87° 8 a. m. 77°
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5 p. m. 77° 8 a. m. 86°
7 p. m. 77° 8 a. m. 87°
9 p. m. 77° 8 a. m. 88°
11 p. m. 77° 8 a. m. 89°

Relative humidity, 4 a. m., 71 per cent; 1 p. m., 49 per cent.

1-8 Heat Index full maximum.

GO MAKE — Get the MAXIMUM use of your money. Buy with Kansas City Star and Times subscription. All other rates.

(Continued on Page 2A)

K.C.I. OPENING DELAYED
Development Director Tells City Council the Construction Strike Has Set Back Date at Least Until 1972

Bohannon View on Slaying
At a press conference early this afternoon Lee Bohannon, candidate for state representative from the 11th district, said that the sympathy of his organization goes to Freedom Inc., and Mrs. Jordan's family over the slaying last night of Leon Jordan.

His statement follows:

"These are troubled times, and the death of Mr. Jordan our organization will and has suffered greatly. We now turn our campaign to the people and Freedom Inc. for advice and support."

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Kansas City woke up that morning to a front page of the *Kansas City Times* announcing Jordan's murder. The *Times* editorial was quoted at the beginning of this story. It immediately recognized that Jordan's murder was an enormous loss to the community. That day's *Kansas City Star* ran the banner headline, LEON JORDAN IS SLAIN. Front page stories detailed the achievements of Freedom, Inc. under Jordan's leadership. Jordan's death and achievements also blanketed the *Kansas City Call* when it appeared July 17th.

The *Call*'s editorial registers the black community's shock, anger, and determination: "Leon Jordan is dead—the victim of an assassin's bullet—but the legacy that he leaves will keep his memory green.

"Leon will never die because the things that he stood for and the organization that he founded and headed—Freedom, Inc.—will live on.

"Freedom, which grew from a tiny seed in the minds of Leon Jordan and Bruce Watkins a scant eight years ago, has become today the strongest black-controlled political organization this city and state have ever known. It started in the 14th ward less than 10 years ago and gradually grew in size and strength until today it operates effectively in four wards and in the coming August primary and November elections, it hopes to expand into a fifth. . . .

"The early morning murder of Leon Jordan shocked and stunned Kansas Citians of all races and of both political parties. Disbelief was the first political reaction, followed by shock, dismay and bewilderment.

"The question on everyone's lips is 'Why?'

"Leon Jordan was not a man to make enemies. He was a friendly and likable man. He was kind, generous, and had a habit of helping, not hurting, people. He was free with his worldly goods. Many is the person, who got help from Jordan when he needed it most.

“It is ironic that he should be shot down with a gun fired by a black man’s hand when Jordan spent his life fighting and pushing for the rights of black men and striving to make the world a better place to live in which to bring up youngsters of all races.

“Freedom, Inc., was conceived because Jordan felt that only building a strong political base could the Negro in Kansas City or anywhere else achieve the economic and social justice which he had sought for decades.

“Jordan’s theory turned out to be correct.”¹¹⁰

Focus/Midwest quoted Senator Thomas Eagleton’s thoughts on learning of Jordan’s death:

“In just a few years as the guiding hand of Freedom, Inc., he molded the black community of Kansas City into the kind of powerful political force for the accomplishment of black objectives it always should have been but never was before.”

It followed Eagleton’s words with its own comment:

“There is little to add. Jordan played ball with the disreputable as well as the elite. He made vote trades, to which he freely admitted. In his last interview, he expressed the struggles with his conscience such actions forced on him. But there is one thing he never did—sell out his people for himself.

“In his heart he was as militant as any posturing streetcorner Stokely; in his manner he was as conciliatory and gracious as any Pullman porter. In between these extremes was the whole man with both ideals to be realized and moxie to recognize the clearest route toward their realization.

“He did not talk like a Jefferson nor act like a Lincoln. He was a politician and a legislator, in the most literal sense of those words.

¹¹⁰ *Call*, July 17 & 24, 1970.

“We are sorry he won’t be with his people any more and we share their sorrow doubly because he was a decent, honest and effective presence for men of good will, regardless of their pigmentation.”¹¹¹

In addition to the editorial that appeared in the *Call*, Lucile Bluford wrote a more personal story about the man she knew since she was in pigtails and he a teenager. She began by mentioning her leisurely phone conversation with him the afternoon before his murder. She remembered this conversation ranging over a broad variety of subjects, noting that while she and Leon often disagreed on some subjects, she always enjoyed their disagreements and usually learned something in the process. This day, however, there was no disagreement. Leon was in a jovial mood, although he seemed more concerned about the challenge to his political seat than she thought he should be.

She then asked him whether Jack Scott, a former Lincoln high school basketball and tennis star, now living in Detroit, had reached him the previous weekend. Scott had come by the *Call*’s office and said that Leon was one of the people he wanted to see. Leon said Scott did indeed reach him. They had a good visit. Leon had taken Scott to see his farm and then put him back on the plane to Detroit.

“Leon was the kind of guy who made lasting impressions on people and who made strong friendships. When old friends came to town, they could not leave until they had visited with Leon. . . . Friends would be grieved at the death of Leon Jordan no matter when or how it occurred. But to have him shot down by assassins in cold blood is more than his friends can take. They can’t understand how anyone would want to kill Leon, a big, likeable, friendly guy who was congenial and jolly most of the time, giving the impression that he didn’t have a care in the world.

¹¹¹ Undated copy of *Focus/Midwest* editorial, LJC.

“This is not to say that Leon did not at times display a temper when he became aroused or agitated about something, but his ‘spouting off’ was short lived and for the most part he always had a smile, a hearty handshake, and was ready with a wise-crack or a joke. He carried on a lot of foolishness and when he felt good and was younger, he was loud and at times boisterous, yet at the same time he had a serious side.

“At heart, he was a ‘race’ man who believed in building Negro power politically and economically. His and Freedom’s goals actually were quite similar to those of the young black militants who were opposing him in the August primary. Both groups are interested in building race pride and race strength.

“Leon sought to build pride in his people not by talking about it but by building an organization in which his people could have pride through its accomplishments. He saw the Negro’s greatest avenue of power to be through political strength. On this, I was wholeheartedly in agreement with him.”

Bluford remembers that Jordan had “reservations about going into the liquor business” when he returned from Liberia. “But Leon’s friends talked him out of his squeamish feelings.” She noted that he “ran a clean, orderly establishment. There was never any trouble in his place that he couldn’t handle himself.” She also said that over the last few years, in several conversations with her he expressed his longing “for the day he could turn the reins of the organization [Freedom] over to a younger man.”

Dr. Girard T. Bryant, friend of Jordan’s for forty-four years going back to their days together in Topeka, and recently named President of Penn Valley Community College, remembered Jordan as, “Sometimes loud and boisterous, almost always radiating good humor and wholesome fun, occasionally quick to anger and equally quick to forgive, constantly making

friends and sometimes short term enemies, Leon went through his life helping people in general, black people in particular. He was a true leader of blacks because he could count on 20,000 or more Negro votes to back him and Freedom, Inc., which he founded. But in any sense of the word, Leon was a leader.

“As his friend, I grieve for him. I grieve also for my people who, by any test, are the real losers in this senseless carnage. It is too late now to rant about the rising rate of homicides or to scatter blame right and left in a futile effort to obtain justice. It is not too late, however, for black people to awaken to what is happening in their midst and to put a stop to it. And only they can do it.”¹¹²

George Lehr, who would go on to become Missouri’s State Auditor and later win plaudits for cleaning up the scandal-plagued Teamsters Union Central States Pension Fund, said of Jordan: “Politically, he was almost a father to me. I don’t know what to say. There’s no way I can communicate what a great loss this is. He was the Martin Luther King of this community. . . . The number of kids he sent through school—paid their way through , no one will ever know. . . .I talked to him a few hours before the shooting. He cautioned me against campaigning out there. He said it appeared to be much testier than in recent years. He said to let him worry about the campaigning out there.”¹¹³

Among the written memories Orchid elicited from friends for a potential book on Leon’s life was one from Kenneth and Julia Smith of Oakland, California. The Jordans had visited San Francisco a few months before Leon’s murder. The Smiths dropped by the Jordans’ hotel to take them on a drive to beautiful Sausalito sitting at the foot of Mt. Tamalpais and spreading to the

¹¹² *Call*, July 17 & 24, 1970.

¹¹³ Amy Hart, “The Founding of Freedom,” pp. 89, 94.

waters of San Francisco Bay. The ladies went shopping. The men watched the ebb and flow of the Bay waters and the varied pedestrians walking by:

“While standing there, leaning on a parking meter, Leon mentioned that the little city of Sausalito reminded him of a section of Paris, France. . . .He said that he had gone to Paris because he wanted to have the privilege of doing the things he wanted to do and not running into friends and acquaintances which would surely persuade him otherwise. Leon also mentioned that never in his life had he gone anywhere that he had not run into someone who knew him or whom he knew. He laughingly recalled that Paris was no exception. Leon had barely completed this statement when up walked a young fellow and said, ‘Pardon me, sir, aren’t you Mr. Leon Jordan of Kansas City, Missouri?’ He went on to say, ‘You possibly do not know me, but my father (mentioning his father by name) is a longtime friend of yours and, of course, I have known you all of my life.’ When the young man left, Leon looked at me and stated very simply, ‘Kenny, history repeats itself; for me there ain’t no hidin’ place down here.’”

For Smith this experience pointed up Leon’s “warmth, personality and demeanor. Leon loved people. Leon served people, and people responded in kind. . . .Leon Jordan was of Kansas City, Missouri, but he cast rays of sunshine throughout the world. And because of this, there was no hiding place down here for him, and I will wager a small bet that there ‘AIN’T NO HIDIN’ PLACE’ for him ‘up there.’”¹¹⁴

Jordan’s funeral on Saturday, July 18th, the largest funeral Kansas City has seen in recent years, was held at the Watkins Funeral Home. Before the services began, Bruce Watkins, with his mother Olivia Watkins at his side, closed his friend’s casket for the last time with tears in his eyes. More than 1500 people overflowed the chapel. Gov. Warren E. Hearnes, Lt. Governor

¹¹⁴Letter to Orchid Jordan from Kenneth Frederick Smith, Orchid Jordan Collection, Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Center, copy in LJC.

William Morris, U.S. Senator Stuart Symington, U.S. Senator Thomas Eagleton, Kansas City Mayor Ilus W. Davis, a large delegation from the state legislature, and numerous city and county officials attended. Freedom, Inc., officials sat in a special section.

Senator Thomas Eagleton and Representative Harold Holliday were the two main speakers at Jordan's funeral. Even though their eulogies are quoted at the beginning of this biography, it is appropriate to quote them again here. Eagleton remembered visiting Jordan a few weeks earlier at the Green Duck where the two went into the back room "which Leon rather imaginatively called his office.

"Orchid was up in the little loft area doing the bookkeeping. Leon and I were seated below. He told me to sit on the only chair—after all, I was a U. S. Senator—thanks in large measure to Leon Jordan—and he was seated on a box turned on its side.

"Listen here, Tom,' he told me, 'some of you white people talk about race. Well, let me tell you—there is a race. That race is the race that all of us are in—black people, brown people, yellow people, white people. That race is the race of life.

"The trouble is,' Leon went on, 'that for so many years you white people wouldn't let us blacks even get to the starting line so that we could get into the race.

" We now have some laws that say we can get to the starting line.

" Tom, as long as I live I am going to try to see to it that my people compete in the race of life.

" We've got to run. We've got to be on the go. We've got to be part of the action."

Eagleton began by noting that the opportunity to give a speech to a politician is ordinarily "both easy and desirable." But the occasion of this eulogy was "neither easy nor desirable. . .

.Leon Jordan was my friend. . . .The death of a friend is a traumatic experience, shockingly aggravated in this setting when that death was provoked wantonly. . .brutally. . .senselessly.”

Despite the dirty connotation that the word, “politician,” carries to some, he and Jordan accepted the title, and for both it “ranks in quality with the title ‘judge,’ or ‘minister,’ or ‘doctor.’

“To Leon Jordan, a politician was one who worked for, with, and alongside people.

“People. . . not buildings. People. . . not monuments. People. . . not hydro-electric dams.

“Leon’s business was people—a few powerful, many powerless. . .a few prosperous, many penniless. . .a few prideful, many pitiless.

“Whatever their financial status, whatever their background, to Leon people—all people—were creatures of God and thus entitled to the basic respect that one creature of God owes to another.

“Of course, the people Leon knew the best were his people—black people. He knew—as everyone here today knows—that despite the great legislative gains of recent years in terms of racial equality, this nation is still deeply divided by a racial chasm.

“He knew that the legislative victories of fair housing, public accommodations and equal employment opportunity merely established the legal framework to begin to change men’s minds and men’s hearts.

“He knew that America was but at the beginning of a long, tormented struggle to square its avowed principle of ‘One Nation, Under God, Indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for All’ with its day-to-day practice of discrimination.”

Eagleton closed by likening the thoughts of this “concerned, sensitive, vital and dedicated man” to Martin Luther King’s appeal at another time and in another city to “Let freedom ring

from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. . . .And when we allow freedom to ring from every village, from every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, Black men and White men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'"

Harold L. Holliday reminded his audience that "Leon was a descendant of that nation of black and kinky haired people who were brought to this land bound and in chains. His was the heritage of one whose forefathers were enslaved, whose bodies knew the sting and hurt of the whip and the lash and were bought and sold like cattle, and were counted and inventoried as a part of the wealth of their owners. His was a heritage of oppression, a heritage of the most outrageous enactment of the tyranny of men over men.

"He was born of a place and time when the people declared that he, solely by reason of his race and color, was inherently inferior. He, therefore, was to be excluded from that society of other so-called civilized folk, thru policies of segregation, discrimination and exclusion, policies which were firmly embedded in the law of the land and enjoyed every legal sanction. But this situation of evil was not to forever endure—For along came Leon Mercer Jordan who a long time ago looked at his heritage and his history—became an extension of these and then took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and entered the arena, joined the struggle for justice, equality and freedom.

"After many years of battle thru the NAACP, the Community Committee for Social Action and similar organizations, it came to pass that one day he decided that the fight for justice, equality and freedom could best be attacked thru government and by law—so it was that the decision was made to create Freedom, Inc.

“Leon taught us to build, not destroy. Real black power he said is vote power and he made vote power synonymous with Freedom, Inc. Today, Freedom, Inc. is an instrument of black power exercised on a scale and to a degree never before known in this county.

“Never forget, never forget this man who lay here. This man of iron will, the boundless energy, and the vision. Yes, the vision—the vision to see that that one day would come when every legal sanction of segregation and discrimination would be stricken from the laws of this land—the vision that he could help to make it so. Oh, yes, remember that day in 1964 when Leon brought us all together and led us to the polls to make certain that there was placed among the laws of this city the requirement that every public place be open to every man. Then he went to Jefferson City and placed the same law among the laws of the state. The iron will and determination of Leon Jordan has increased the number of black elected officials in this county from two to eighteen. Today black men sit on our city council. Today black men sit on our school board. Black men sit on our Junior College board. Black men sit in the state legislature. Black men sit on the Circuit bench, as our County Clerk and County Coroner. Black men sit in these places because of the political power of Leon Jordan and Freedom, Inc.

“Thank God, black men now know power—black power.

“Remember the days when black men, hat in hand, went begging to white plantation boss politicians, who thru instruments of fear and intimidation delivered the black vote. And in return, black folks got nothing. But this humiliating and degrading circumstance is now over.

“The day came when any man who wants to win public office by the vote of this county had to come to Leon Jordan. How often have we seen Leon sitting there on that elevated platform he used as an office at the Green Duck, he peering down in the uplifted faces of Magistrates, Prosecutors, Collectors, County Judges, Senators, State Representatives,

Congressmen and U. S. Senators. They all came to request the support of Leon Jordan and Freedom, Inc.

“Leon often said that the fact that men of great power came to him was not a tribute to him, but rather an indication of the respect and appreciation that powerful men had for the power of the black vote. Leon always said that he was only the instrument thru which the will of his people could be made known. But he was more than that.

“He was the Leader. A true gifted servant of the people. His was the vision, the wisdom to know the job to be done and how to do it. He was the man with vision who saw the need, and refused to believe that the need could not be met. His was the love, the will, the unswerving determination that no black child should come into the world amid the evils among which he was born. His was the inspiration, that driving personality which compelled other men to believe—to act.”

After an extensive procession of cars to the grave site at St. Anthony Gardens in Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Father Edward L. Warner, Jordan’s priest at St. Augustine’s, gave the funeral sermon. Noting that Jordan’s death followed soon upon the recent deaths of Medgar Evers, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy, he posed the question “is there any wonder that sometimes men refuse to get involved?” But he described Jordan as an “adventurist” who accepted the challenge “of that which is new and different.” Warner, elected to the school board just a year earlier, insisted Jordan’s work must go on. “His work has not been cut down with him. We will pay tribute to him best by getting back where the action is. It must be determined that death will not stop us.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Copies of Eagleton’s and Holliday’s eulogies to Jordan, LJC; *Call*, July 24 & 24, 1970.