

Williams F. Winter
John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation
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My remarks this morning will be directed toward the theme of this conference: “The Politics of Racial Reconciliation.” That is a subject which I particularly welcome this opportunity to address.

I have spent much of my adult life in the harsh and heated atmosphere of southern elective politics, which for so long was driven by the inflammatory issue of race. I have long found myself searching for ways to measure how far we have come in addressing the myriad conflicts that have arisen out of that issue. I am encouraged by the progress I have personally observed in that regard, but I continue to be reminded of how much there is still left to do.

As I was giving thought to these issues a few years after I left the governor’s office in Mississippi, my fellow southerner, Bill Clinton, was elected President. He and I had served concurrently as governors of our respective states of Arkansas and Mississippi, which share a similar history in terms of race. We had compared notes on a number of occasions, and we both had long-felt concerns over our failure to eliminate the remaining barriers to achieving a more united country. He had had as one of his predecessors Orval Faubus; I had had Ross Barnett. We both understood the tragic ramifications of a politically imposed racially divided society, which we had both fought to end.

In a conversation one day with President Clinton, I encouraged him to consider establishing a special advisory committee to attempt to measure the state of race relations in America. He enthusiastically embraced the initiative and later put in place a seven-member Advisory Board on Race. It was chaired by Dr. John Hope Franklin. I had the privilege of also being a member. It was an eye-opening experience for all of us.

Under Dr. Franklin’s leadership, we set out on our challenging mission, which involved countless public meetings and individual conversations with people of every conceivable racial background in every area of the country. I personally visited twenty-six states in the course of our work and came to appreciate fully for the first time the fascinating diversity of the citizenry of our country and the potential strength that diversity brought. I found that while the greatest challenge in race relations had historically been that between black and white people, there now had emerged a racial diversity that is much more complex.

A year and a half of intensive effort by our commission produced conclusions that were both heartening and disturbing. It was obvious that tremendous progress had been made in the advancement of educational and career opportunities, but the economic and educational gap remained unacceptably wide. Not so subtle code words were being used by many politicians to replace the more blatant and odious words of the past. Far greater social integration was taking place, but there was still a distressing lack of trust between the races and too much so-called white flight. There was a huge difference in the perception of how far we had come in race

relations. Most white people seemed to think that we had come farther than black people did. Many whites thought that it was time to quit talking about it.

Of all the meetings which the Board held across the country, it was the one on the campus of my alma mater, the University of Mississippi, that led to some of the most positive and interesting results. On a cold rainy winter night, a racially diverse crowd of almost a thousand students, faculty, and citizens from the surrounding area gathered in the historic Fulton Chapel on the University campus. Dr. Franklin set the tone with his stirring opening remarks. It resulted in a passionate and candid but civil discussion lasting more than two and a half hours. It was the first time that a meeting like that had been held on that campus, where some thirty-five years earlier, a tragic riot had taken place over the admission of one black student to the University.

It was obvious that this opportunity for a free and open discussion of race needed to be extended. In the ensuing weeks, with the support of the university's chancellor, Robert Khayat, the framework for a permanent organization was put in place. Now several years later, that idea has emerged in the form of the Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, based at Ole Miss, that is doing encouraging work in reconciling racial differences in many communities across Mississippi and neighboring states. It has demonstrated effectively how the opening of honest communication between people of difference races serves to reveal how much we have in common.

The work of the institute has led to highly satisfying and successful efforts in building bridges of understanding and trust to replace the suspicion and hostility that had previously existed.

One of the most dramatic results was the creation of a multiracial coalition in Neshoba County, Mississippi, where three civil rights workers, two white and one black, had been horribly murdered in 1964. As a result of the coalition's influence on state and political leaders, one of the surviving murderers was belatedly brought to justice and convicted of his horrific crimes. Three years ago, an African American was elected the mayor of the white majority county seat of Neshoba County.

The work of the institute continues at an increasingly effective level in communities that for so long were imprisoned behind the walls of a politically closed society. These encouraging models of racial cooperation that are being created in Mississippi I hope will serve to instruct other communities across the nation, just as your John Hope Franklin Center is doing here. In fact I hope that we can find ways to support each other in this important work.

On the basis of my participation in the numerous forums and conversations that the Clinton Advisory Board had conducted over the course of eighteen months I learned so much about my country and about myself. I found for instance how we all tend to form stereotypes of people we don't know. I also found a clear consensus around several common concerns. Regardless of where we were—whether in South Los Angeles, South Chicago, Boston, Miami or the Mississippi Delta—there were certain basic propositions that almost everybody could agree on: First, everybody wanted their children to get an adequate education; second, everybody

wanted a fair chance to secure a job that would enable them to make a sustainable living; third, everybody wanted to be able to live in a decent house on a safe street; fourth, everybody wanted access to some kind of affordable health care; and finally, everybody wanted to be treated with dignity and respect. These priorities were held by absolutely everybody.

That experience has led me to ask why we can't come together around a good faith effort to try to bring about the realization of these very reasonable aspirations that all of us share. Why can't we make that our ultimate national political commitment. When we make the achievement of those objectives our main goal, I believe that we shall have found the key to our national purpose. As an old politician I believe that that not only would be good public policy but it would also be good politics.

In the pursuit of those aims, our preoccupation with simplistic and irrelevant differences will fade away, and we can begin to set goals that transcend race. I believe that in working together to achieve these results we shall have laid the basis for true racial reconciliation.

We cannot forget, though, as we seek to pursue this common purpose that we must also face the reality that there are forces, many of them politically driven, that threaten to frighten and divide us and that use the issue of race to accomplish that result. That means that we must understand that our task of racial reconciliation involves a much broader policy agenda. Now with the stakes higher, it is more vital than ever that we have the informed and responsible participation of more of us in the molding and shaping of public understanding and public opinion in a way that will help unify our country. This participation must be motivated not by a quest for political or private advantage or personal profit but by a genuine recognition that only through a shared vision can we achieve our greatest success. We must build on that vision. Unless we learn how to arrive at wise and thoughtful solutions to the issues that confront us, we shall continue to struggle and to be haunted by fears and doubts about our future in a new and hostile world.

The irony is that even though we have put behind us so much of what had been wrong and have achieved a greatly increased level of material affluence and productivity, rather than automatically producing a better society, we are finding instead a disturbing lack of civil discourse and an increase of partisan rancor. There is a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots and a predisposition to getting while the getting is good. In our self-centered preoccupation with our own private interests, we tend to forget that we are bound together by a social contract that commits us to get along with each other and to look out for each other. This has been the admonition of wise leaders such as Dr. Franklin who have done so much to change our country for the better and who have helped preserve its noblest qualities.

We cannot permit the reservoirs of leadership like his to be supplanted by those with the fattest checkbooks or those concerned solely with their own narrow, selfish agendas. We cannot let greed overwhelm the generous and liberal spirit that has marked our historic progress. That is why all of us must be involved with citizens across our land to mobilize that spirit of community and good will that still exists in abundance but so often gets shunted aside by the political hucksters and the fast-buck fortune-seekers.

We must work to develop more political and community leaders with the vision and civic courage that will enable them to confront and deal with difficult public issues, whether on race relations, education, housing, or health care, before they spiral out of control. We must work to create a climate where our political leaders will be better able to act decisively on vital issues instead of feeling that they must draw ideological lines in the sand and pander to the most selfish and cynical of their constituents or kowtow to the shameless peddlers of influence.

It is a sad commentary on our so-called enlightened society when the inane and preposterous opinions expressed on talk radio, on some television shows, and now on the internet appear to have more acceptance among much of the body politic than thoughtful voices of reason and compassion.

So many people work in lonely and isolated situations without the benefit of knowledgeable advisers. We need all the help we can get to protect us from the raw pressures of biased or uninformed public opinion that rob us of our individuality. We must do more to make reasonable and conciliatory voices heard. We must support and encourage honest, conscientious public officials to take principled stands even when those stands may not follow the public opinion polls. None of us ought to expect politicians to deliver everything we want, but we have a right to expect from the politicians more than pandering.

In the increasingly complex and diverse society in which we live, very few public issues have clear-cut answers. It is the test of the true leader to find a way to accommodate differences in a reasonable and responsible way. Honorable compromise has always been a necessary element in political leadership. Some naïve people regard it as a sign of weakness. Actually it may involve great courage. It involves recognizing that most issues have two or more sides. Otherwise we wind up with nothing getting done. The kind of political gridlock that we are seeing these days is a format for disaster. We must remember that none of us has a totally clairvoyant view of the problems that confront us. For most of us, our perceptions and opinions have emanated from our own life experiences. We must therefore understand how important it is to use that acquired knowledge plus our own common sense to weigh and explore and be open to new and better ideas and ways of doing things. We must not be afraid to examine the bases of our beliefs.

We obviously do not live in the kind of closed society that I once knew in the old segregated South, but I am afraid that we still live in a society that has too many minds oblivious to the needs of so many of our fellow human beings. The paradox is that after seeing so much positive change that has helped right many of the old wrongs, we find ourselves now facing the situation that a gifted Mississippi writer, David Cohn, once predicted could be our fate: “With heaven in sight,” he said, “we insist on perversely marching into hell.”

We must see to it that our young citizens have a clear understanding of where we have come from and who we are as a people and how we got to where we are. There is not enough of this kind of teaching and learning going on. Too many of our most able and promising young men and women have only a passing acquaintance with the events and heroes who shaped our history. Particularly is this true about the history of civil rights. I am appalled at the number of

high school and college students—black and white—who do not know much about those heroic struggles for civil rights that were fought in the 1950's and 60's.

The lack of civic learning and an understanding of our historical background can be a fatal flaw in the capacity of these future leaders to lead. Without a knowledge of what has gone before, they may well fall into the trap of repeating the old mistakes and ignoring the lessons that earlier generations paid so dearly to learn.

They must clearly understand that public and civic leadership is never an easy road to travel. There are a lot of stresses and strains these days. It is easy for us to get split up over issues about which many people feel deeply. There are full-time practitioners in politics and in the media and even in some church groups who fan the flames of emotion and discord.

We must not let ourselves succumb to the tendency to demonize those who see things through different eyes, based usually on different life experiences. Sometimes we have to walk in someone else's shoes for a while to understand where the person is coming from.

My perspective is that the best way to overcome these stresses is through sharing experiences—working and talking with others and recognizing that we are all in this together and that what we have in common is so much greater than the things that divide us.

All of us must be willing to speak out against bigotry and intolerance and injustice. We must seek to find worth in every person. That is how we pay our dues for the privilege of living in a free society. That is how we can pass on to the next generation a better country than the one we inherited.

That is a lesson for all of us. We can let the naysayers and cynics cloud our vision and close our minds, or we can work to make our society more productive and livable for everyone. This is really what racial reconciliation is all about. This should be an opportunity that more of us should welcome. To feel that one is a participant in building up one's community, especially in times of challenge and hardship, can be the key to a fulfilling life.

Helping to establish models of programs that work, sharing successes, transmitting a spark of know-how—these must be our tasks. All of this calls for a continuing process of self-education and civic education. This must be true education not in sound bites and slogans but in the serious understanding of our responsibilities in creating a truly united society.

Having seen the incredible changes in race relations in my native state and region, I am convinced that it is not totally idealistic or unrealistic to believe that we can achieve similar progress in challenging other elements that divide us and diminish our ability to live comfortably together in a manner that enriches the lives of all of us.

That does not suggest that any of us must relinquish our long-held cultural, spiritual, or political beliefs, but it must involve a willingness to accord respect to those who hold different ideas or who come from different backgrounds and life experiences. In other words, we must strive to achieve a society where all can feel that they are valued and included. A society or a

community built of racially different and diverse individuals can actually be stronger and more vibrant by virtue of the combining and harmonizing of its different elements.

Now the time has come for all of us to join together in embracing the full measure of our common existence and the recognition and appreciation of our common humanity.