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## **“An Unprecedented Conversation”: The Limits of President Clinton's Advisory Board on Race**

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“An Unprecedented Conversation”:  
The Limits of President Clinton’s Advisory Board on Race

Taylor E. Barnes

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On June 14, 1997, President Clinton delivered the commencement speech at the University of California, San Diego. In this speech, Clinton unveiled “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Presidential Initiative on Race” as the newest, and seemingly most personal, project to be undertaken by his administration. He told his audience that, “Building *one America* is our most important mission...Money cannot buy it, power cannot compel it. Technology cannot create it. It can only come from the human spirit.” He invoked a sense of responsibility in his listeners by emphasizing the “human spirit” necessary to create and sustain racial equity. He explained that America had reached a “truly golden moment,” having ended the Cold War, maintaining the strongest economy America had seen in a generation, and exciting new technological advances.<sup>1</sup> However, he also explained “there [were] still challenges out there,” some bigger than others. Among them, he listed disease and poverty, gang violence, and the pending retirement of the Baby Boomers. President Clinton made it clear which issue he felt was most important to address:

I believe that the greatest challenge we face...is also our greatest opportunity. Of all the questions of discrimination and prejudice that still exist in our society, the most perplexing one is the oldest, and in some ways today, the newest: the problem of race. Can we fulfill the promise of

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks at the University of California San Diego Commencement Ceremony in La Jolla, California,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=54268&st=&st1=>

America by embracing all our children...? In short, can we become one America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?<sup>2</sup>

In this speech, the President clearly laid out just why a project on race equity is desperately needed. He demonstrated the connection between a unified America and one that will continue to prosper. Without becoming “One America in 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” President Clinton felt that the country’s growth would be hindered, its people would be stifled, and its legacy would be a messy one.

William Jefferson Clinton was sworn in for his second term on January 20, 1997. In June of the same year, President Clinton signed Executive Order 13050, officially creating the President’s Advisory Board on Race. The Order formed a seven member Advisory Board, and was to be supported and funded by the Department of Justice. It also clearly stated that “The Advisory Board shall terminate on September 30, 1998,” should the President decide not to prolong the project beyond that date.<sup>3</sup> The Advisory Board was another facet of the President’s larger “One America” project.

The largest goal for the Initiative and the Board would be to “bridge the ideological divide” preventing Americans from unifying under a notion of equality, one that was so eloquently laid out by the founders over 200 years earlier in the Declaration of Independence. He felt that Americans’ ideas and preconceived notions about race were preventing them from fulfilling America’s idea of equality. President Clinton asked UC San Diego’s graduating class of 1997 to “join [him] in a great national effort to perfect

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<sup>2</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks at the University of California San Diego Commencement Ceremony in La Jolla, California,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=54268&st=&st1=>

<sup>3</sup> William J. Clinton, “Executive Order 13050,” June 13, 1997.

the promise of America for this new time as we seek to build our more perfect Union.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout the speech, Clinton emphasized that racial equality and understanding would not only benefit minorities, but also the white majority. Most of all, however, the entire nation would reap its benefits from becoming “One America” through the creation, maintenance, and proliferation of equity. The Initiative would, at worst, open up a dialogue that would reinsert race back into the national conversation. This, the President hoped, would help foster a sense of pride that would enhance the quality of life for all Americans.

“One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” and its Advisory Board on Race worked between September 1997 and September 1998 in order to facilitate this “great national effort.” During its yearlong tenure, the Board compiled tens of thousands of documents pertaining to its members’ work. Life is breathed back into the Board through an examination of these documents. Though often sporadic, and even sometimes vague, the endless collections of speeches, memos, and emails, the documents portray the committed yet troubled legacy of Clinton’s Advisory Board. Few secondary sources on the Board exist, so the archived documents are integral to understanding the inner, and outer, workings of the Board. The President’s Advisory Board on Race’s year-long effort to understand, converse about, and propose ideas in order to improve race relations in the United States was seemingly commendable. However, the Board, and the “One America” initiative in its entirety, were flawed from their very inception. Their fallibilities had many aspects, including their short, one year tenure, the disconnect between talk and action, and the difficulty it faced making its intentions clear. These, among other

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<sup>4</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks at the University of California San Diego Commencement Ceremony in La Jolla, California,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=54268&st=&st1=>

fallbacks, kept the Board from actualizing its goal and becoming a solid landmark on the path towards racial reconciliation. Their work would not yield the results President Clinton had hoped for largely because was not employed with the tools, or the time, to do so.

Most likely, Clinton hoped that the Initiative and Advisory Board would add to his legacy and enhance his relationship with the black community. However, he received much criticism for only giving the project a one-year tenure. If the Initiative's and Board's goal centered around "dialogue, study, and action," many people felt that twelve months would not be nearly enough time. After all, race was often perceived as centuries old conversation topic. And by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, race wasn't just about being black or white; other ethnicities and cultures also had to be considered. Clinton, however, had a strong history with supporting minority rights. He supported Affirmative Action as a remedy to racial inequity, though he was diligent about its revision and coming to a new understanding about what it truly meant. What is more, his administration saw a deep decrease in unemployment and a significant strengthening of the economy.<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to examine national affairs as well in order to contextualize the founding of the Advisory Board. A document detailing the proposed work of the Presidential Initiative on Race explains that President Clinton felt "America [was] strong enough to look to the future" after "having moved aggressively in the first term to get the country back on the right track."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the 42<sup>nd</sup> President's first term is marked by great internal and external progression. For example, President Clinton signed the North

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<sup>5</sup> For more specific information, see *Bill Clinton and Black America* by Dewayne Wickham or *The Color of our Future* by Farai Chideya.

<sup>6</sup> "President's Initiative on Race: Background and Points of Progress," found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in December of 1993, which lowered tariffs and eased other trade restrictions on the US, Canada, and Mexico. He also signed a welfare reform bill in August 1996, which gave more control to the states in hopes to improve the system. Many other accomplishments pepper the years leading up to the Presidential Initiative on Race, and by September of 1998, the budget was at a surplus for the first time in 30 years. Needless to say, the Clinton administration had much to be proud of. This sense of stabilization and security supposedly urged the President to address “the issue of race relation as [America prepared] for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”<sup>7</sup>

However, considering the aggressive nature in which the President was known for handling foreign policy, as well as internal policy, the Advisory Board seemed weak. Not only was its tenure a short one, its ability to effect change seemed to be trivial, if existent at all. He worked diligently to cultivate a strong sense of kinship between himself and minority groups, particularly African-Americans. Few would question Clinton’s intentions – the creation of the Initiative and the Advisory Board seemed to be an act of genuine care. Yet it still didn’t seem to be enough, particularly when compared to his reputation and the vociferous language surrounding the Board’s creation. Clinton’s intentions in creating the Advisory Board cannot, of course, be determined without his own input. He does not include any insight in *My Life*, nor are there any clues among the documents archived with the National Archives and Records Administration. This is perhaps the greatest omission from the Board’s short history, particularly in light of Clinton’s reputation among minority and oppressed groups.

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<sup>7</sup> “President’s Initiative on Race: Background and Points of Progress,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

In the October 1998 issue of *The New Yorker*, renowned author Toni Morrison claimed that “white skin notwithstanding, [Bill Clinton] is our first black President.” She likened his childhood to the “trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s and junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.”<sup>8</sup> She emphasized that though other Presidents are known as the champions of civil rights, something about Clinton was different. She suggested that unlike Abraham Lincoln, whose Emancipation Proclamation actually freed very few slaves, or Lyndon Johnson, who signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law more for the sake of peace than any personal conviction, Bill Clinton understood what it was like to be black. The mixed responses Morrison received are beyond the point; her message is one that many have relayed and supported.

Morrison’s suggestion that Clinton was indeed closely connected to the black community is evident in the amount of responses written about his presidency. For example, in *Bill Clinton and Black America*, Dewayne Wickham, a journalist for *USA Today*, collected short essays about how the former President created, fostered, and maintained such a tight relationship with the black community. One contributor suggested “the real thing is that the boy blew the saxophone.”<sup>9</sup> Others suggested that it was more subtle things: his ability to understand and “study human nature,” he was an “underdog,” and that he was simply “human.”<sup>10</sup> Whatever it was, Clinton found some of

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<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison, “Clinton as the First Black President,” *The New Yorker*, October, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Lowery in *Bill Clinton and Black America* by Dewayne Wickham, New York: Random House, 2002, pg 25.

<sup>10</sup> Gwen McKinney in *Bill Clinton and Black America* by Dewayne Wickham, New York: Random House, 2002, pg 27; Norma Johnson in *Bill Clinton and Black America* by Dewayne Wickham, New York: Random House, 2002, pg 34.

his most loyal constituents in the black community, as well as in other minority communities.

Wickham explains that though he does not see Clinton “as the first black president...he was the next best thing.”<sup>11</sup> He lays out facts and figures about Clinton’s administration. For example, he appointed six African-Americans to cabinet positions and appointed “more black judges than Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush combined.”<sup>12</sup> Not only was he making appointments, his administration saw “black unemployment [fall] sharply, black homeownership and the number of black-owned businesses [rise] to record levels.”<sup>13</sup> Clearly, Clinton had already secured his legacy as a champion of the African-American community as well as other minority groups.<sup>14</sup> What, then, was Clinton’s reasoning behind creating the Presidential Initiative on Race and the Advisory Board on Race?

Undoubtedly, Clinton hoped that the Initiative and Advisory Board would add to his legacy and enhance his relationship with the black community. However, he received much criticism for only giving the project a one-year tenure. If the Initiative’s and Board’s goal centered around “dialogue, study, and action,” many people felt that twelve months would not be nearly enough time. After all, race was often perceived as centuries old conversation topic. And by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, race wasn’t just about being black or white; other ethnicities and cultures also had to be considered. Clinton, however, had a strong history with supporting minority rights. He supported Affirmative Action as a remedy to racial inequity, though he was diligent about its revision and coming to a new

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<sup>11</sup> Dewayne Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America*, New York: Random House, 2002, pg 239.

<sup>12</sup> Dewayne Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America*, New York: Random House, 2002, pg 235.

<sup>13</sup> Dewayne Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America*, New York: Random House, 2002, pg 237.

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see *Bill Clinton and Black America* by Dewayne Wickham or *The Color of Our Future* by Farai Chideya.



understanding about what it truly meant. As Wickham pointed out, his administration saw a deep decrease in unemployment and a significant strengthening of the economy.

It is also important to examine national affairs as well in order to contextualize the founding of the Advisory Board. A document detailing the proposed work of the Presidential Initiative on Race explains that President Clinton felt “America [was] strong enough to look to the future” after “having moved aggressively in the first term to get the country back on the right track.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the 42<sup>nd</sup> President’s first term is marked by great internal and external progression. For example, President Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in December of 1993, which lowered tariffs and eased other trade restrictions on the US, Canada, and Mexico. He also signed a welfare reform bill in August 1996, which gave more control to the states in hopes to improve the system. Many other accomplishments pepper the years leading up to the Presidential Initiative on Race, and by September of 1998, the budget was at a surplus for the first time in 30 years. Needless to say, the Clinton administration had much to be proud of. This sense of stabilization and security supposedly urged the President to address “the issue of race relation as [America prepared] for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”<sup>16</sup>

However, considering the aggressive nature in which the President was known for handling foreign policy, as well as internal policy, the Advisory Board seemed weak. Not only was its tenure a short one, its ability to effect change seemed to be trivial, if existent at all. He worked diligently to cultivate a strong sense of kinship between himself and minority groups, particularly African-Americans. Few would question Clinton’s

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<sup>15</sup> “President’s Initiative on Race: Background and Points of Progress,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

<sup>16</sup> “President’s Initiative on Race: Background and Points of Progress,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

intentions – the creation of the Initiative and the Advisory Board seemed to be an act of genuine care. Yet it still didn't seem to be enough, particularly when compared to his reputation surrounding minority rights and social program reform and the vociferous language surrounding the Board's creation.

Though Bill Clinton was certainly not the “first black president” as Toni Morrison suggested, his connection to the African American community, as well as other minorities, was a very real one. For example, between November 1997 and January 2001, the President's approval rating ranged from 78 up to 97 percent in the African American community.<sup>17</sup> He did not need to solicit more votes, better ratings, or more loyal constituents. The Advisory Board was a fallible organization from the beginning, but its legacy is complicated by its possible altruistic, yet mysterious, origins.

Executive Order 13050 was the first step to creating the President's Advisory Board on Race. Officially, the Advisory Board was a subset of the “One America” initiative, though the Presidential Initiative on Race and the Advisory Board functioned in conjunction with one another more often than not. In fact, it is reasonable to say that each depended on the other – for feedback, sources, and support. The Advisory Board, however, was responsible for “reaching out to all Americans to talk about race, learn about...existing preconceptions and misperceptions, and recommend solutions to create One America.”<sup>18</sup> It was to counsel the President on how to best improve race relations. Its work ultimately culminated in a 135-page report sent directly to the President, containing a summary of their work and their recommendations for new policy to help unite America.

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<sup>17</sup> Dewayne Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America*, New York: Random House, 2002, pg 236.

<sup>18</sup> President's Advisory Board on Race, “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Forging a New Future.”

In the three months between Executive Order 13050 and the beginning of the Board's work, President Clinton selected seven diverse, distinguished individuals to serve as members on the Advisory Board. Dr. John Hope Franklin, Professor of Law at Duke University, served Chair of the Advisory Board. The six other members included: Linda Chavez-Thompson, an Executive Vice President of the AFL-CIO; Suzan D. Johnson Cook, the Senior Pastor at the Bronx Christian Fellowship; Thomas H. Kean, former Republican governor of New Jersey and President of Drew University; Angela E. Oh, an attorney specializing in criminal defense; Robert Thomas, President and CEO of Nissan Motor Corporation, USA; and William F. Winter, former Democratic Governor of Mississippi. The President also asked Christopher Edley, a professor at Harvard Law and co-director of The Civil Rights Project, and Laura Harris, a member of the Comanche Nation and a worker with Americans for Indian Opportunity, to serve as consultants to the Advisory Board.

President Clinton also found himself busy giving speeches to various interest groups throughout the nation as he put the Initiative into motion. Most notably, he delivered a speech to the NAACP Convention on July 17, 1997. This speech demonstrated that education was one of the main focuses for the Advisory Board and the Initiative as whole. He told members of the audience that "it is a good deal that there are so many of us who are different from each...but [we must] celebrate our differences, but the most important thing is I'm an American." He expounded on this notion, urging each citizen to "to join hands with all of our children to walk into this era, with excellence in education, with real economic opportunity, with an unshakable commitment to one

America that leaves no one behind.”<sup>19</sup> He preached a message of not just tolerance, but acceptance and even “celebration.” He emphasized an “excellence in education” as the foundation for equality – both the system itself and what that system teaches its students. In order to articulate the objectives of the Board, which included an emphasis on education, the Board issued a memorandum that articulated its five major goals. They were:

- 1) to articulate the President’s vision of a just, unified America
- 2) to educate the nation about the facts of race in this country
- 3) to promote constructive dialogue to work through the issues of race
- 4) to encourage leadership at the federal, state, local, community, and individual levels to bridge racial divides and
- 5) to identify and develop solutions in critical areas such as education, economic opportunity, housing, crime, and health care.<sup>20</sup>

These goals were fairly particular and specific, yet they were seemingly grand for an organization that would exist for only one year. Clinton suggested that in order to carry out these five goals, the Board would have “to do certain things that are government policy, but...also know that this is an affair of the mind and heart, as well.”<sup>21</sup> These five goals then, would center around two loci: one governmental, the other personal. However, this understanding only compounded worries that the Board would be unable to actuate its goals. Even if policy was changed, there was no guarantee that the “minds and hearts” of the American people would follow in stride. Though his comment was

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<sup>19</sup> President William Clinton, “Remarks at the NAACP Convention,” July 17, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

<sup>20</sup> “President’s Initiative on Race: Background and Points of Progress,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

<sup>21</sup> President William Clinton, “Remarks at the NAACP Convention,” July 17, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

intended to quell worries about the abilities of the Board, it ultimately suggested that the members were facing a challenge even the best intentions could not conquer.

The goals of the President and his Advisory Board were more problematic when paired with the three strategies that were employed to actualize them: “constructive dialogue, study, and action.”<sup>22</sup> The only one of these that invokes a sense of community involvement is “constructive dialogue,” but even it wouldn’t be supported by any real ability to effect change. After all, the “action” aspect refers only to recommendations and information that would be given to lawmakers. The Board itself was incapable of creating concrete policy. It seems that the members were faced with nearly, if not totally, unreachable goals and ineffective plans to achieve them. The members, however, powered through. They attended countless meetings, conferences, and interviews. Sometimes met with adversity, sometimes met with open arms, the Board worked to resolve racial problems in the United States from September 1997 to September 1998.

During the Board’s beginning weeks, its members articulated its message in every possible medium – press conferences, news releases, and television appearances. Dr. John Hope Franklin and Angela Oh appeared on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on September 30, 1997. Franklin told Mr. Lehrer that his greatest hope for the Board was “to improve the climate and move forward toward racial reconciliation.”<sup>23</sup> It is clear that Dr. Franklin saw the importance of “constructive dialogue.” When asked if she felt that the Board was “off to on the track toward doing something that matters?,” Oh replied, “I really do...I think it is quite courageous for this administration to take on an issue such as

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<sup>22</sup> “President’s Initiative on Race: Background and Points of Progress,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

<sup>23</sup> *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, MacNeil/ Lehrer Productions, September 30, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 55, folder 5.

this and to be supportive of an initiative that take the American public on a journey that many people have not wanted to take.”<sup>24</sup> She made it clear that this “journey” would probably be met with resistance, noting that race is still a “matter of the heart,” once again heightening the obstacle the Board would face.<sup>25</sup> The interview on *The NewsHour* suggests that the Board was aware of the obstacle in its path, yet it was not any less ambitious or determined to actualize their goals. Their greatest opponent would be the framework of their organization itself. From the beginning, the Advisory Board was rendered incapable of acting upon any of their findings or inciting dialogue with the promise of change. And though it may be an “issue of the heart,” as well, the Board’s inherent lack of tangible power was their greatest enemy.

The Presidential Initiative on Race and its counterpart, the President’s Advisory Board on Race, started their yearlong journey to understanding race relations in the early fall of 1997. Though President Clinton signed Executive Order 13050 in June of that year, it took a few months to appoint members to the Initiative and Board and to organize what would be nothing more than the best laid plans.

A document that was sent out to various members of the White House staff and Congress explains that in the three months between Executive Order 13050 and the Initiative and Board actually beginning, “the organizational structure and areas of

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<sup>24</sup> *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, MacNeil/ Lehrer Productions, September 30, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 55. Folder 5.

<sup>25</sup> *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, MacNeil/ Lehrer Productions, September 30, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 55. Folder 5.

responsibility have been delineated into three areas.”<sup>26</sup> Those three areas were “outreach, policy planning and research, and communication.”<sup>27</sup> Members of the Board were also appointed during this time and immediately began attending press conferences, briefings, and informal meetings.<sup>28</sup> They quickly decided how they were going to fulfill the President’s five goals, ultimately deciding that their own meetings should be simultaneously recreated in cities and towns throughout the United States. It also became clear that college campuses would be a valuable resource in trying to study race relations and creating suggestions to unite the country.

While the Initiative had its own physical space in Washington, D.C., the four major meetings of the Advisory Board took place in cities across America. The Board also hosted fifteen televised “Town Hall” meetings throughout the country.<sup>29</sup> By hosting not only Advisory Board meetings but also public meetings in cities across America, the Board disseminated their message to many different groups and regions. What is more, such variance in location also allowed the members to receive and record feedback from people of many different races, ages, and classes. By televising some of these meetings, the Board reached an even vaster audience. Though they could not receive immediate feedback, viewers were likely candidates for correspondence with the Board. In this sense, the Board demonstrated their understanding of the importance reaching out to out to the entire nation – in both the personal and regional senses.

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<sup>26</sup> “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: President’s Initiative on Race, Background and Points of Progress,” October, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> For example, on June 14, 1997, the seven members of the Board joined together at a Press Conference in San Diego, California before President Clinton made his formal announcement about the Initiative and Board. For a transcript, visit The American Presidency website, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=48648&st=&st1=>

<sup>29</sup> Colin Campbell and Bert Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy*, New York: Chatham House, 2004, pg 194.

The Advisory Board did not exclusively lead Town Hall meetings. In fact, governors, mayors, city council leaders, among many other community leaders, were encouraged to engage their own communities in conversations about race. Those leaders that intended to lead Town Hall meetings were asked to send minutes, a list of participants, and personal response forms back to the Advisory Board. Though it is not clear what the members of the Board did with these documents, the latent intention of the Board to engage themselves in community and personal responses still remained.

By suggesting and encouraging strong ties between the Board members and the American community at large, the Advisory Board was able to engage many who long felt they deserved a voice. The Board continually strived to maintain those ties, and did so not only through the aforementioned Town Hall meetings, but also through reaching out to college campuses. It was, in fact, at the University of California San Diego, where President Clinton first announced that the formation of the Presidential Initiative on Race.<sup>30</sup> Not only were campuses encouraged to participate, a week in April of 1998 was designated as the “Campus Week of Dialogue.”<sup>31</sup> The packet sent out to college officials throughout the nation explained the Initiative and the Board expected the “week [to] bring people together across racial lines, reach young leaders, and stimulate solutions to new steps.”<sup>32</sup> To do so, they encouraged the campus communities to organize their Town Hall meeting, to host a meeting between members of the college and members of the community, and to sponsor a meeting for student leaders to convene and share their

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<sup>30</sup> To see a full transcript, visit The American Presidency Project website:

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=54268&st=&st1=>

<sup>31</sup> “Campus Week of Dialogue: Who Will Build One America?”, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 3. \*In fact, the entire month of April 1998 was designated as a “Month of Dialogue.”

<sup>32</sup> “Campus Week of Dialogue: Who Will Build One America?”, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 3.



thoughts, among other suggestions. The letter from Richard W. Riley and Dr. John Hope Franklin that came attached to the packet encouraged campuses to participate and suggested that members would share received “feedback with the President to assist with the development with his report on race to the American people.”<sup>33</sup> Once again, the Board emphasized **its** close tie with the public, thereby enforcing the notion that their voices would not only be heard, but also that they would be considered valuable. This message was integral to engaging the American public in President Clinton’s “unprecedented conversation about race.”<sup>34</sup>

Another program that fell among the “most important priorities” for the Initiative and the Board was to “[identify] and [share] examples of promising practices” for race equity on both community and national levels.<sup>35</sup> The program identification program was set up in order to gather information about effective programs already in place throughout America. In doing so, the Board members could not only congratulate and acknowledge such programs, but also glean valuable information about practices that were already proving effective. They hoped to share this information with other organizations, communities, and individuals in order to motivate them to incorporate similar programs and practices into their own lives. This information would also be used by the President in his report to the nation at the Initiative’s conclusion. Essentially, “Promising Practices” was a medium through which members of the Initiative and Board could create a running list a programs that would be valuable in their year-long effort to promote racial equity.

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<sup>33</sup> “Campus Week of Dialogue: Who Will Build One America?”, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 3.

<sup>34</sup> Steven A. Holmes and James Bennet, “A Renewed Sense of Purpose for Clinton’s Panel on Race,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Promising Practices,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 3.

Once again, the Initiative and Advisory Board attempted to be attuned to the American people. Not only would programs receive national recognition, they would also be a valuable source for members of the Board and Initiative as they made their final report. Furthermore, the programs would supposedly be brought to the President himself. The Board perpetuated a sense of humility by looking to American public at every possible juncture. Members continually engaged the public, reassuring them that they were the most valuable resource for their work, even if those assurances were false.

This sense of partnership was perhaps the Advisory Board's most valuable tool. Despite great participation and the sense of importance the meetings undoubtedly instilled in those participants, the Board relied on words, not action to create and maintain this sense of participation. The disparity between their rhetoric and their abilities would be the Board's greatest downfall.

When President Clinton announced the creation of "One America," he explained that the President's Advisory Board on Race would focus on dialogue, inciting a "great and unprecedented conversation about race."<sup>36</sup> The Board, however, focused not only on an outward dialogue – one between its members and the American community – but also an internal one – a dialogue among its distinguished members. These two separate yet parallel conversations depended upon the creation and maintenance of a distinct rhetoric that would become the image of the Advisory Board on Race. Through this measured manner of conception, the Board and its members lost themselves in the details of that image and the consistent preparation needed for its preservation.

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<sup>36</sup> Steven A. Holmes and James Bennet, "A Renewed Sense of Purpose for Clinton's Panel on Race," *The New York Times*, January 14, 1998.

Clinton's idea of an "unprecedented conversation" undoubtedly confused the American public. Many citizens wrote to the board wondering how a centuries-old conversation could become "unprecedented."<sup>37</sup> Others were encouraged by the idea of a new kind of dialogue – one that is beneficial instead of belittling. The latter notion is the one with which the Board ran.

The collection of speeches given by Judith A. Winston is one of the most valuable sources in understanding the rhetorical creation of the Advisory Board and the Initiative on Race as a whole. Winston gave many of her speeches during the Board's and Initiative's early months, from September to November of 1997. These early speeches were given to interest groups, national and local organizations, members of Congress, as well as to college communities. Within them, some given on the same day, Winston continually lays out the Board's mission(s) and their intention to create Clinton's so-called "unprecedented dialogue."

On September 11, 1997, Winston delivered a speech to the Congressional Black Caucus Issue Forum on "Race Dialogue." Within the speech, Winston explains President Clinton's personal connection to the struggle for racial equity. She told the Caucus that "[President Clinton], as so many of us, has witnessed first hand [racial discrimination's] deleterious effects and the harm which it has caused."<sup>38</sup> The rhetoric surrounding Clinton's vested interest in the Board's work, as well as the Presidential Initiative on Race as a whole, was another important point that members of the Board worked

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<sup>37</sup> Even Judith Winston admits to this type of confusion in "Talking points for Judith A. Winston: Public Policy and International Affairs National Conference, Academy for Educational Development," October 21, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 3.

<sup>38</sup> "Talking Points for Judith A. Winston: Congressional Black Caucus Issue Forum, Washington Convention Center, September 11, 1997," found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 4.

diligently to convey to the public. This, of course, was an important message to convey to the American public as well as their political representatives.<sup>39</sup> By expanding upon the President's *personal* desire to mend racial rifts, the Board members accentuated the close connection between themselves and the Oval Office. This message assured the public that recommendations made by the Board would not only be received by the President but also, and perhaps more importantly, treated with expediency and care.

The same day, Winston delivered another speech that impressed the “unprecedented dialogue” was “personal” to the President upon the audience; it also served as the epitome of the messages Board members would convey over the next twelve months in speeches, press releases, and interviews. Within the first few bullet points, Winston articulated the five broad goals of the Board and Initiative and three broad strategies employed to achieve those goals. Loosely stated, they hoped to demonstrate a “vision of a...unified America, to promote constructive dialogue, to educate the nation, to encourage leadership, and to identify policy and programs.”<sup>40</sup> The three ways the Board – and the President – foresaw achieving these goals were “constructive dialogue, study, and action (policy changes).”<sup>41</sup> Seemingly, these ends and their means accentuated what Winston calls an “imperative...opportunity” to draw upon the “issue of race and racism” that members of the Initiative and Board saw at the “center

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<sup>39</sup> For example, Winston mentions this again in the following speech: “Remarks by Judith A. Winston: The American Institute on Managing Diversity, Inc.,” September 18, 1997, , found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 5.

<sup>40</sup> “Talking Points for Judith A. Winston: Congressional Black Caucus Issue Forum, Washington Convention Center, September 11, 1997,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 4.

<sup>41</sup> “Talking Points for Judith A. Winston: Congressional Black Caucus Issue Forum, Washington Convention Center, September 11, 1997,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 4.

of the nation's consciousness."<sup>42</sup> This language, in combination with the Initiative's goals, conveys a message of urgency – something needed to be done at what was painted as an integral moment in history. The sense of urgency conveyed in this speech, as well as many to come, articulated the Board's need to encourage its mantra of “dialogue, study, and action.”<sup>43</sup>

However, the importance placed upon the Initiative's goals by such rhetoric was swiftly undercut by one major concession. On October 21, 1997, Winston delivered a speech at the Public Policy and International Affairs National Conference entitled “Race and Ethnicity in the United States: The Public Policy Challenge.” Within the first minutes of the speech, Winston told her listeners that “the President's Initiative on Race is *not a policy making body*.”<sup>44</sup> And though she quickly announced that she would address the complexity of the relationship between the Initiative and Board and those capable of enacting policy, the comment swiftly rendered the image of the Board's members impotent. Suddenly, the rhetoric of action that overflowed out of speeches, press releases, and various interviews became just that: words. The Initiative's and the Board's inability to actually effect any real change not only destabilized their images; it also emphasizes its reliance upon action-based rhetoric to compensate for its impotence.

The Board and the Initiative as whole were, of course, involved in an active way. Winston attempted to explain that though “the President's Initiative in not a policy

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<sup>42</sup> “Talking Points for Judith A. Winston: Congressional Black Caucus Issue Forum, Washington Convention Center, September 11, 1997,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 4.

<sup>43</sup> “Talking Points for Judith A. Winston: Congressional Black Caucus Issue Forum, Washington Convention Center, September 11, 1997,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 4.

<sup>44</sup> “Talking points for Judith A. Winston: Public Policy an and International Affairs National Conference, Academy for Educational Development,” October 21, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 3. (emphasis added)

making body...[they were] committed to ACTION.”<sup>45</sup> She followed up with active verbs such as “identify,” “study,” and “evaluate.” Yet each of these actions require some sense of self-removal or passive position. And though members would “recommend policies” there is an overwhelming sense of passivity despite the consistently used rhetoric of action.

Winston delivered another speech on September 18, 1997,,,,, at the American Institute for Managing Diversity, Inc. in Atlanta. Unlike the others, this speech or set of talking points, has her own notes in the margins. Over and over again, Winston wrote reminders to herself emphasize the point that “if only talking, no action → wouldn’t be here.”<sup>46</sup> This important message appears several times throughout the short, four page speech and emphasizes how very important the message of action was to the Initiative and Board. And though she undoubtedly delivered a speech laden with this message, the fact remains that the “culmination” of their year of work would be “a report...of the state of race relations in America.”<sup>47</sup> Whether or not the report would be utilized to create new policy “tailored to respond to the needs of [this] diverse nation” couldn’t be predicted as the members began their yearlong tenure.

In early November, the President was scheduled to appear on *Meet the Press* to present his board to a larger, diverse audience. In the days leading up to his appearance, members of the Board, as well as various officials on his staff, were asked to come up

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<sup>45</sup> “Talking points for Judith A. Winston: Public Policy and International Affairs National Conference, Academy for Educational Development,” October 21, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 3.

<sup>46</sup> “Remarks by Judith A. Winston: The American Institute on Managing Diversity, Inc.,” September 18, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 5.

<sup>47</sup> “Remarks by Judith A. Winston: The American Institute on Managing Diversity, Inc.,” September 18, 1997, , found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 5.

with “hard questions” that could be potentially posed to the President. Within the first two months of the Initiative and Board, it seemed that their respective members were aware of the organizations’ downfalls, whether real or perceived. Some questions that were received, collected, and forwarded to the President’s assistants included the following:

- “It looks like the Initiative has fizzled. There’s been little action or activity. How do you respond to that criticism?”
- Will this result in another Kerner Commission type report that will gather dust on the shelf?
- Where is the Initiative headed? What seems to be the problem? Is this just another case of how the White House is incapable of developing and implementing a single plan?”<sup>48</sup>

These questions demonstrate that members of the Initiative, Board, and White House staff understood how the Initiative was perceived and the undeniable link between a strong image and action-based dialogue. They also demonstrate that such rhetoric would not be enough to protect the Initiative, Board, and President from public criticism. What is more, these examples suggest that members were aware of this problem.

As the President’s appearance grew closer, a member of his staff prepared a briefing packet filled with what they saw as the most challenging questions that might have been posed to President Clinton. Though such preparations are routine within the White House, the questions posed to the President – as well as the prepared answers – demonstrate that the progress and actions of the Initiative were not matching the rhetorical promise. Answers include statistics about attendance at events held by the Board and the administration’s history with project coherence. None of the answers

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<sup>48</sup> Email sent from Michael Wegner to Claire Gonzales, November 6, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 53, folder 2.

demonstrated a solid sense of progress or action. Instead, the President was instructed to side step those questions and inundate his audience with seemingly impressive figures.<sup>49</sup>

Though the Board –as well as the entire Initiative – was undoubtedly inspired by the promise of policy-driven action, they were rendered incapable of seeing that action through. The action-based rhetoric provided the American public and private sectors with a sense of progress and, perhaps more importantly, a desire to bring about and support progress. However, as evidenced in speeches and interview preparations, the Board and Initiative seemed aware that their rhetoric could not be backed by a tangible ability to effect change. This powerlessness boosted the importance of that rhetoric, making it a centerpiece of the one-year Initiative. Ultimately, it created an image that the members, limited by their lack of real power, were incapable of upholding, eventually leading to many critiques and questions by the American public and press.

Upon President Clinton’s announcement of his Advisory Board on Race, media and personal responses began pouring in. While members of the media seemed more willing to portray skepticism from the very beginning, many personal letters from interested and concerned citizens offered support and polite suggestions. Examining both newspaper articles and personal correspondence, it is clear that the Advisory Board received mixed reviews from its inception, demonstrating the obstacle its members would face daily.

Media coverage was, for the most part, either negative or neutral. Just three days after Clinton shared his intentions to create such an Advisory Board, Russell Baker of *The New York Times* offered a searing criticism on June 17, 1997. He claimed “Mr.

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<sup>49</sup> “President’s Initiative on Race: Q & A’s for Meet the Press,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 53, folder 2.



Clinton summons us only to a national gabfest,” and wonders “why the President think we lack dialogue on race.”<sup>50</sup> He proffered what many Americans were thinking: how can this be new considering how long the has country been talking about race? By October of the same year, it seemed that Americans, at least as represented by the media, were beginning to wonder if the Advisory Board was going to do anything at all. Steven A. Holmes, also of *The New York Times*, reported that President Clinton and Vice President Gore met with Board to urge them along in their efforts. “Missing,” wrote Holmes, “...was any crispy talk about what the panel itself would do to foster better understanding among the nation’s various racial and ethnic groups.” Perhaps even more important is Holmes’ suggestion that “Mr. Clinton himself has not given the panel any clear direction.”<sup>51</sup>

Within the first month of its tenure, the media had already painted a dour picture of the Advisory Board. By December, journalists were writing articles that suggested that talking about race simply wasn’t working and it wasn’t going to. One journalist suggested that supposed “honest dialogue” is “neither.”<sup>52</sup> Another claimed that the talk was “bland,” largely because “anyone who has not yet been brushed by the wings of tolerance, sensitivity, and some semblance of good will is probably beyond reach.”<sup>53</sup> It seems that prognosis regarding the Advisory Board moved from slightly confusing to mostly useless. The media was not suggesting that Americans should sit back and do

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<sup>50</sup> Russell Baker, “We’ve Got to Talk,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 1997

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0DE7DE1E3FF934A25755C0A961958260>

<sup>51</sup> Stephen A. Holmes, “President Nudges His Panel to Take Action,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 1997 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C03E7DD1E3AF932A35753C1A961958260>

<sup>52</sup> Felicia R. Lee, “The Nation; The Honest Dialogue that is Neither,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 1997 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9401E2DA113DF934A35751C1A961958260>

<sup>53</sup> Walter Goodman, “Where Image Prevails, Talk About Race Turns Bland,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2007

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9806E0DF173CF93AA35751C1A961958260>

nothing. How could they ignore the over 3,000 hate crimes that were reported in 1997, 61% of which were motivated by race?<sup>54</sup>

Members of the media were not willing to pitch in any suggestions, though. Dissimilarly, citizens often offered their recommendations willingly and with care. Many, for example, wrote about their concern about the Advisory Board's short, one-year term. Patricia Patton wrote to the President offering her support of a mission she felt was "right on target with the issues that need to be addressed." She recommended the President expand its tenure "for several years" in order to "have a better chance for developing 'implementable' policies and solutions," and to "leave a legacy that could very well be the catalyst which heals our country's racial wounds."<sup>55</sup> Ms. Patton, like so many other Americans, including members of the media, felt that a 300-year-old problem could never be solved in twelve short months. The Board received other suggestions as well. One citizen expressed concern that the members were "old" and lacked a connection to the younger generation left to "implement" their proposals.<sup>56</sup>

Mostly, however, citizens were concerned about Clinton's desired "unprecedented conversation" about race.<sup>57</sup> Marvin Turner wrote, "racial dialogue is necessary but not sufficient." He asked that the President "launch a more directed and targeted attack upon these public policies that limit economic opportunities, economic development and social mobility for a group of Americans who are African, Asian, Latina, and Native

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<sup>54</sup> US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Incident Based Statistics*, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ibrs.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from Patricia G. Patton, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 1.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from John T. McCann, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.

<sup>57</sup> Steven A. Holmes and James Bennet, "A Renewed Sense of Purpose for Clinton's Panel on Race," *The New York Times*, January 14, 1998.

America.”<sup>58</sup> Mr. Turner saw the Advisory Board’s most fallible quality: it rested upon conversation, not action.

Of course, there were those who found the Advisory Board’s greatest fallback to be its mere existence. Roy H. Wallis sent a postcard to President Clinton that simply stated: “This new commission of yours is only another way to increase government spending and an attempt to solicit the black vote.”<sup>59</sup> Another citizen wrote in that the government has “already give the blacks zillions of dollars in welfare money. So, the day you give them twenty-four trillion dollars will be the day will be the day we all vote Republican.”<sup>60</sup> Clearly, not all Americans were convinced by President Clinton’s display of altruism.

Other members of the American community seemed to completely misunderstand the function of the Advisory Board all together. Many citizens wrote in complaining about mistreatment at work or in public facilities hoping that members of the Board would be able to assist them in their pursuit of justice. An African American man from Kentucky wrote in hoping for assistance in his court case against his former place of employment.<sup>61</sup> Elmer Jones sent records of discrimination he faced in his workplace, in the military, and in government offices.<sup>62</sup> Each complainant was sent a letter explaining that while the Advisory Board did not handle cases itself, it wished to eradicate the

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<sup>58</sup> Letter from Marvin Turner, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 1.

<sup>59</sup> Postcard from Roy H. Wallis, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 1.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to President Clinton on September 30, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 2.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Benny J, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Elmer Jones, September 30, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.

problems of which they were speaking. The misperception of not only the Advisory Board's agenda but also its resources speaks to one of the many challenges it faced – articulating its true mission(s).

This challenge, however, was a product of the Board's own creation. By steeping itself in an action-based rhetoric, the Board appeared to be committed to actualizing change, or at least capable of it. "Action" was one of the tools the Board claimed to use to bring about racial equity. Can citizens be blamed? The Board's rhetoric was not in line with its abilities, which probably created the confusion that led to letters like the one from Elmer Jones.

Based on all of the conflicting, if not confusing, perceptions and understandings surrounding the President's Advisory Board on Race, it is difficult to conjecture exactly how it was being perceived. The mixed messages from the media likely confused many Americans when they tried to deduce the purpose of the Board as evidenced by the mixed responses and suggestions. The disconnect between the Board's promises and its practices only compounded the problem. Ultimately, it had to face an enormous obstacle, created by the media and even the Board itself in order to attempt to actualize their goals.

All the mixed reviews and feelings also support the need for some type of action. However, the outrage, the support, the unwillingness to offer assistance – each of these suggest a great social need for something to be done. That alone offers the Advisory Board and President Clinton esteem for taking a step in the right direction, even if that step was small, misdirected, and fruitless.

One of the best examples that best demonstrated the Board's misdirection is the omission of Native Americans was glaring, despite the Advisory Board's claim to

diversity of members. Though Laura Harris, a member of the Comanche Nation, served as a consultant to the President and the Board, she was not a public face of the Board. The fact that no Native American served on the official Advisory Board left many Americans immediately disillusioned with it from the very beginning. Ultimately, the members tried to quell such worries and extended seemingly special efforts to reach out to various tribes throughout the country, but the initial and continual absence of a Native American on the Board was an impediment it could not, and would not, overcome.<sup>63</sup>

One citizen wrote in from Denver the week the Advisory Board held its meeting there. He asked President Clinton “how can this be part of a national dialogue without having at least one representative from the people who lived in this land before the Europeans began their conquest?”<sup>64</sup> Mr. Rauch’s candid question was one asked over and over again – the Native Americans were here first, how could they not be included? This letter, like so many others, went unanswered. Others were more angry, more confused about why “their people” were being excluded. Black Wolf wrote, “we are the first citizens of this country – not someone visiting.” He asked, “Are we not an issue to you anymore, have we been chopped down so low in numbers that our [voices] and [cries] for help are no longer heard[?]”<sup>65</sup> Black Wolf relayed many Native Americans’ feelings of abandonment and betrayal. They felt that they had been left out of the discussion yet again. Perhaps they were right.

Nearly a year after the Advisory Board was announced, a young woman named Seledia Shephard told the President that “how [Native Americans] were omitted

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<sup>63</sup> Example from Questia article

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Thomas M. Rauch, March 23, 1998, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 1.

<sup>65</sup> Online message sent from Wendel “Black Wolf” Kurz on July 12, 1998, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 1.

originally is unknown, but it is never too late to make peace if we constantly strive to be honorable.” She also reminded him that “we are the United States...we must be all inclusive.”<sup>66</sup> Just a few days earlier, the Initiative and the Advisory Board met in Denver, CO where they were met by protesters demanding the inclusions of indigenous people. Judith Winston, executive directory of the Presidential Initiative on Race replied that “[The Board] was not intended to represent the composition of the United States, we can’t have that with only seven people [on the Board].”<sup>67</sup> Winston’s comment served as evidence that the Board’s language, which emphasized “One America,” was a false promise. “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” became “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” except for those groups we don’t have room to represent.

If the Board’s original exclusion of Native Americans and other indigenous people was not endangering, Ms. Winston’s comment most certainly brought many Americans to that point. After March 23<sup>rd</sup>, letters, emails, and online messages began to pour in, demanding she recant her statement or the President take executive action. The President, for the most part, had a strong record concerning Native American issues. Perhaps this confused citizens even more. He met with tribal leaders, housing initiatives, and sent representatives to reservations to help improve their living conditions, among other things. How could there be no Native Americans serving on the Advisory Board?

The President and the Advisory Board had just the answer. Laura Harris, a member of the Comanche Nation, served as a consultant. As aforementioned, Ms. Harris

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<sup>66</sup> Letter from Seledia Shephard, April 2, 1998, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 6.

<sup>67</sup> Online message sent from Carl Hudson on March 24, 1998, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 1.

was not a public face for the Board, nor was she as influential as the seven members.

When the Board did respond to letters, they wrote the same thing over and over. It read:

Thank you for sharing your opinions with us. You expressed concern that Native American perspectives will not be adequately represented in our effort. Let me assure that this is not the case. The Initiative is focused on improving race relations between people of all races and ethnicities. In fact, Laura Harris, a member of the Comanche Nation, is one of two senior consultants to our Advisory Board. She has spent the last five years with Americans for Indian Opportunity, a New Mexico-based organization devoted to tribal leadership and government issues. Ms. Harris also managed the national leadership program for Native Americans.<sup>68</sup>

This, of course, did nothing to quell the outrage surrounding the omission of Native Americans on the Board itself. Ms. Harris' credentials did not place on the Board itself. Ms. Winton's comment that the Board "was not intended to represent the composition of the United States" only solidified Black Wolf's fear that his people's cries were no longer being heard at all. Her comment suggested that a group had to be important enough to have a representative selected – White, Black, Asian, Latino, but not Native American. Though certainly not the only ethnic group omitted, it is clear why they may have felt that way.

The omission of Native Americans was never remedied. And Ms. Winston's comment proved the Board's disinterest in attempting to do so at all. If Americans were not disillusioned by March of 1998, they probably were following her attempt to calm protestors. The Board responded politely, proving that their own bureaucracy was more powerful than the insistent, and valid, demands of the American public. These actions portrayed the Board as disinterested in what Americans really wanted and as "experts" in finding a remedy to race inequity and a proposal for race reconciliation. If the Board really was about "unprecedented dialogue," it seemed that they were failing one of their foremost missions. Their disinclination to take their fellow citizens equally demonstrated

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<sup>68</sup> Sample response letter taken from a letter to Edith Huckelebridge, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.

that the Advisory Board was not about conversation, but instead a monologue. What is more, the Board once again proved that this conversation was just that. Though it could attempt to quell such worries with words – though Winston failed at even that – they could *do* nothing. The response to the exclusion of Native Americans only supported the notion the Board was nothing but talk.

The President’s Advisory Board on Race submitted their final report, *One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Forging a New Future* to President Clinton in September of 1998.<sup>69</sup> The over 150-page document was published in order to be accessible to organizations and individuals all over the country and contained the Board’s findings and recommendations, as well as successful programs for race equity and reconciliation already in place throughout the nation. Dr. John Hope Franklin, chairman of the Board, wrote the opening letter, explaining that they “did not expect [their] task to be easy,” but were pleased with the overwhelming support they received. This, Franklin wrote, demonstrates that “race still divides our country.”<sup>70</sup> The report was “not a definitive analysis of the state of race relations,” but rather, “an account of the Board’s experiences and impressions.”<sup>71</sup> Once again, the Board admitted its **fallibility**: it could talk, it could observe, but it could not *act*.

The report also offered the landmarks the Board claimed to reach during its tenure, including a National Conference on Hate Crimes in November of 1997, the identification of over 300 “Promising Practices” to serve as models for effective programs to improve race relations, and over 35 states’ and almost 90 cities’ involvement

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<sup>69</sup> For a full copy of the report, visit the NARA website at [http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR\\_main.pdf](http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR_main.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> The President’s Advisory Board on Race, *One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Forging a New Future*, [http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR\\_main.pdf](http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR_main.pdf).

<sup>71</sup> The President’s Advisory Board on Race, *One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Forging a New Future*, [http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR\\_main.pdf](http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR_main.pdf), pg 1-2.



in the program. Most importantly, though, the report contained many recommendations in order to prepare the country for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The most prevalent and urged of these recommendations was the improvement of education. Dr. Franklin wrote in his opening letter that “the nation must focus on creating equal opportunity to quality education for all and on giving our young people tools to become leaders and role models.”<sup>72</sup> They also recommended closely monitored welfare reform, a deeper, more thorough understanding of the connection between race and poverty, as well a review of the “Administration of Justice” among minorities. These recommendations, however, were not new or groundbreaking when the report was published.

One historian, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, spoke of what she called the “metalanguage of race.”<sup>73</sup> Essentially, Higginbotham argued that race stretched beyond ethnicity and into other aspects of identity, be it class, gender, education, religion, or otherwise. Each of these things further defined and clarified the others, and the Board demonstrated that it may have understood this concept in their recommendations. However, the members were incapable of displaying that understanding when actually doing their work. Largely, this is due to the fact the Board was organized to exist for only one year. This issue of race on its own – if it can stand on its own – could never be thoroughly researched and understood in a twelve-month time period, let alone the intricacies of class, gender, and so on.

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<sup>72</sup> The President’s Advisory Board on Race, *One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Forging a New Future*, [http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR\\_main.pdf](http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR_main.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined this term in her essay “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Winter, 1992), pp. 251-274. The term refers to her theory that race cannot be mentioned or understood with the consideration of other societal factors. Essentially, when one discusses race, they inevitably include class and gender, among other denominators.

The Advisory Board's short tenure is undoubtedly its greatest flaw. That fallibility, however, rests on the shoulders of former President Clinton. Certainly, he understood what a complex issue race was and remains to be. Even one year of the most open, useful dialogue imaginable could not begin to resolve the complexity of race relations so deeply rooted in American's history. Perhaps Clinton hoped this one year Initiative would spark many like it around the nation, thereby continuing to facilitate an open dialogue.

Clearly, his hope did not become reality. What Clinton actually did with the Board's final report is unknown. The lack of literature about the Advisory Board and the Initiative suggests that perhaps the supposed "groundbreaking" government organization was anything but. Even the former President mentions the Advisory Board only once in passing in his epic 969 page autobiography. Though the "breadth of the panel's undertaking was impressive," its legacy seems to be cast aside or simply forgotten all together.<sup>74</sup> Despite a year of hard work, and though a year is very short relative to the matter at hand, the Board was left with their report and no governmental action.

Though Clinton's legacy has yet to be determined, the performance of the Advisory Board will play into the way Americans remember him. The nature of the project could be determined selfish or altruistic, and perhaps the same can be said about the eight years Clinton spent in office. The Advisory Board, though seemingly unselfish, may be regarded as a political ruse to boost ratings. If not, its inherent and predictable lack of success is saddening rather than forgettable.

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<sup>74</sup> Colin Campbell and Bert Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy*, New York: Chatham House, 2004, pg 194.

Its members may not have known at the beginning, and perhaps not even at the end, but the Advisory Board was doomed from the beginning. Native Americans were left off the Board, the media generally reacted poorly, offering little journalistic support, the members were are similar in age, but most importantly, the Board was armed with rhetoric of action and absolutely no ability to change anything tangible. Perhaps some people were enlightened; perhaps some felt that the notion of such a Board was admirable in and of itself. Most, though, were disenchanted by the Board's inability to actually *do* anything. Had President Clinton, for example, organized a Congressional committee to address the issue, citizens would have been reassured that their suggestions would wind up in the hands of someone capable of writing legislation and policy. In the end, the Advisory Board, though noble in intention, was nothing more than an empty attempt to remedy an epic issue throughout America's history.