

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

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

by

Taylor E. Barnes

On June 14, 1997, President Clinton delivered the commencement speech at the University of California, San Diego and 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. The Initiative included the creation of the President’s Advisory Board on Race, a seven-member team that would spend a year cultivating an “unprecedented conversation” about race in the United States. Despite the enthusiasm with which Clinton started the project, the Initiative and the Board have been largely absent from discussion of the Clinton presidency and civil rights. This essay seeks to explore the topic not only to shed light on a forgotten piece of history but to also systematically question the role of the executive office in racial reparation and the limits of that role. By examining primary souf [§]r that role. By examining prjpr-2 (ig )-117.76 239.201 cQ 9.3

sources, it becomes evident that the Board's disappearance from the Clinton legacy is due largely in part to its failure to live up to the expectations it created for itself. The essay deconstructs the "rhetoric of action" that the Board fashioned and maintained throughout its tenure and compares that rhetoric the actual capabilities of the Board. Ultimately, the Board was incapable of fulfilling the role it presented to the public due to both logistical, bureaucratic limitations as well as the problems inherent in attempting to resolve racial inequality, demonstrating that the executive office has, despite past success, limited effectiveness in the field of social justice in the modern United States.

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Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Taylor E. Barnes

May 7, 2009

**“One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”**

In 1997, four days after President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 13050 into law, *New York Times* journalist Russell Baker went to work looking into what the President called “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative on Race” and its subsidiary group, the President’s Advisory Board on Race. Clinton unveiled his new Initiative in California, among voters whose record demonstrated limited sympathy for African Americans and othe.36 34.08006 59oc1ho(or) -2 (e) 3 (r) -7 (d ) -10 (on306 59oc1ho(or) -2 (e) 3 (r) -7



When Clinton launched his initiative in 1997, he was immensely popular and looking to solidify his presidential legacy in his second term. America's economy was strong and employment and housing levels were promising for the nearing new millennium. Despite all of this, which would promise a positive take on the administration's legacy, Clinton went one step farther in hopes of securing a legacy that was both positive and heavily influenced by his gainful relationships with minority groups. The President's Advisory Board on Race began as a yearlong initiative in 1997, the product of the aforementioned Executive Order by President Clinton. In retrospect, the creation of the Board seems unnecessary to solidify race as a cornerstone in the Clinton legacy. His approval ratings, particularly among minorities, were comfortably high; his reputation as the vanguard for minorities was solid. Even today, Clinton retains a huge following in the African American community, for example. Yet his Initiative on Race, such an important part of his plans for his second term, is largely absent from discussion of the Clinton presidency and civil rights. In this light, this project becomes important simply to recover a misplaced piece of history.

However, this essay seeks to do more than fill in gaps of neglected history. Uncovering the work of the Advisory Board and the limitations and obstacles the Board faced reveals crucial developments in late twentieth century politics, race relations, and the power of the executive office to create and maintain programs whose aims lie in social justice work. Particularly, it delineates the causes of the Board's inability to effect change. Beginning with the history of presidential policy on race, focusing mostly on the Truman and Johnson administrations, this research is able to speak to the larger narrative of the history of presidential policy on race. The essay then turns to a larger, broader

discussion of the Advisory Board and its umbrella organization, the Presidential Initiative on Race. From there, the paper seeks to understand why, in the end, the Board was incapable of becoming a truly revolutionary presidential initiative on race. Some of these reasons include its limited tenure and its practical constraints. The Advisory Board could advise but could not act. Despite this obvious aspect of its existence, the members were urged to surround themselves and their organization with a “rhetoric of action” that promised more than it could deliver. Further, the paper examines media coverage and citizen responses that helped shape the image that the Board was instructed to present to the American public, highlighting ways in which it was underestimated, overestimated, or entirely misunderstood. Finally, the essay then moves briefly into a theoretical investigation of race and race construction highlights other obstacles the Board would face.

In spite of its many shortcomings, the Board was a product of its environment. As America approached the new millennium, it was clear that race relations in America were in a dire state. As late as September 30, 1997, *The New York Post* was publishing sports headlines such as “Take the Tribe...and SCALP ‘EM!” to cheer on the hometown Yankees.<sup>2</sup> A month later, former Mississippi governor William Winter, who worked with the Board, delivered a speech explaining that “our work is far from over.”<sup>3</sup> The approaching 2000s left more to be desired in the way of progress on race relations and

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<sup>2</sup> Found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 1.

<sup>3</sup> Lauren Allen, “National figure delivers speech on race relations,” Newspaper information not provided. Found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 6.



## **Presidential Policy on Race**

Presidential race policy has a long legacy in the modern presidency, and understanding this legacy - its successes, failures, and tribulations - is an important step in situating former President Clinton's Advisory Board on Race in the narrative of federal attempts to address racial issues in America. Highlighting the processes through which race and race relations have been handled and legislated by the federal government is also illuminating, enabling researchers to draw conclusions about Clinton's Advisory Board on Race and its unique contribution to the canon of race policy.

Many scholars tend to agree with historian Stephen Shull's notion that it was not until 1954, when the Supreme Court, under Chief Justice Earl Warren, overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* in *Brown v. Board of Education* that "the civil rights movement...placed civil rights squarely on the national agenda."<sup>4</sup> Despite this common conceptualization,

respect from their fellow countrymen and the number of lynchings was on the rise. As America resettled into a peaceful era abroad, internal conflicts escalated.

The PCCR set about its task inconspicuously, choosing to hold “public meetings” only in Washington and solicited personal responses from “184 organizations and 102 individuals” without “going on the road to various racial hot spots around the country.”<sup>6</sup> Their decision was largely in response to the less than desirable internal environment, in which both the President and the Committee’s participants faced potentially violent backlash from Southern politicians and also because the PCCR was just as much an experiment as it was anything else. The members spent a year producing its final report, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights*, which provided not only an assessment of current race relations but also methods for fostering a more hospitable environment for minorities – specifically African Americans – in the United States. Their recommendations were vast, ranging from calls for desegregation of Washington, DC’s public spaces such as parks and restaurants to the “reorganization of the Civil Rights Section of the Justice Department.”<sup>7</sup> The members took a strong stance against lynching, urging Truman to establish a nation-wide bill that banned such so-called vigilante justice and make it a federal offense. But when it came to the desegregation of schools, the PCCR hit a roadblock. Members were caught between what they felt was right and what they felt was feasible in the social and political climate of the 1940s and early 1950s.



protector of individual rights and liberties. Shortly thereafter, Truman presented Congress with a ten-point plan to reverse the destruction of guaranteed rights and made his conviction that “the Constitution guarantees...individual liberties and...equal protection the laws...not [be] denied or abridged anywhere in the Union” quite clear.<sup>13</sup> It was, of course, met with great resistance and never left the Senate. Ultimately, Truman “issued two executive orders mandating the desegregation of the armed forces and the

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former President was also responsible for appointing Earl Warren, who wrote the majority opinion in *Brown*, to the position of Chief Justice. Though Eisenhower never foresaw Warren's approach to jurisprudence, this appointment was integral to the legal momentum of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>17</sup> His administration also passed two rather unremarkable civil rights laws in 1957 and 1960. Eisenhower's approach to civil rights was what some may call "reasonable;" he sought civil rights not because of his own feelings about them but instead because it was suitable given the time period and the national climate. His approach was also indicative of his politics. As a Republican, Eisenhower was determined to "eliminate racial discrimination in those areas where the president had clear-cut authority and there was no question of overriding states' rights."<sup>18</sup> Eisenhower was forced to negotiate between his convictions and his politics. And like Truman, Eisenhower also faced the challenge of maintaining the American image during the Cold War.

The example that typifies Eisenhower's approach to race occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. The famous Central High School integration left Eisenhower in a difficult position. Faced with Arkansas governor Orval Faubus' decision to call in the National Guard under the pretense of maintaining "law and order," the President had to make a quick decision. Ultimately, Eisenhower ordered US Army troops into Little Rock to remove the National Guard and ensure that the "Little Rock Nine" were able to attend school in accordance with *Brown v. Board*. His decision demonstrates his position clearly. Though Eisenhower ultimately acted in favor of civil rights, his motivations were

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<sup>17</sup> For more information about Chief Justice Earl Warren, see Edward G. White, *Earl Warren: A Public Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph L. Rauh, Jr.,



not entirely based on his own beliefs. He acted for several reasons, the first being that the Supreme Court overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*, rejecting “separate but equal” as constitutional. To deny students admittance to a previously all-white school was simply against the law. Perhaps more importantly, however, was Eisenhower’s vested interest in the maintenance of America’s image as leader of the free world and the beacon of democracy. There was much at stake as the United States engaged in the Cold War with the Communist Soviet Union, including America’s reputation and prestige as well as its safety. Maintaining this image was crucial to thwarting the Soviet Union’s attempts to garner more support throughout the world, particularly in Third World countries whose attention was focused on the performance of civil rights in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

President Lyndon B. Johnson found himself in a similar position. As the early 1960s began to unfold, the fight for civil rights was burgeoning, not only among African Americans, but other minorities and women as well. The office of the president could no longer act only when necessary. In the wake of John F. Kennedy’s death, Lyndon Johnson became an advocate for civil rights, in hopes of not only securing his own legacy but also bolstering America’s esteem throughout the world. Most famously, Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law, demonstrating his ferocious attitude on this issue and attacking segregation. Unlike his predecessors, Johnson was able to locate inequality not only in terms of politics but also in light of economics. He supported “open housing legislation...desegregation suits, initiate employment legislation” among many other things.<sup>20</sup> Though not all of his

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<sup>19</sup> For more information about how Cold War politics shaped the Civil Rights Move (F) -5 2

endeavors were successful, Lyndon Johnson's administration was the first in post- *Brown v. Board* America to take an open stance on and become and advocate for civil rights.

US race relations increased,” confirming the notion that the external pressures of the Cold War and the continuing threat of Communism played a role in shaping the ways the federal government responded to social problems.<sup>22</sup> Johnson was bold in asserting his position, going so far as to say “we shall overcome” in a televised speech on March 15, 1965. He addressed Congress, saying, “There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an *American problem*.” He continued to remind listeners that everyone was affected by such inequality, “Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”<sup>23</sup> This public display of dedication placed the office of the Presidency firmly behind the Civil Rights Movement. Johnson made efforts towards racial equality a national priority and solidified the work Truman began two decades earlier.

Unfortunately, this dedication did not last into the 1970s. Both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford were more reluctant to address the issue, though it became clear that the implementation and enforcement of these new pieces of legislation needed to take precedence over the creation of new laws and executive orders. Nixon went so far as to counteract efforts supported throughout the 1960s, including “the Equal Rights Amendment, racial transportation of students across school district boundaries, ... [and] mandatory native-language instruction in bilingual education.”<sup>24</sup> Nixon made it clear that furthering the Civil Rights Movement’s agenda -10 (a)Dp10(a) 3 (s) 8 ( ) -10 (nu (a) 3 (nda)dbve) 3 (m)

His affability came in part from his politics as a Republican and the inherent view that the government shou

decrease in power of the central government as a key influence in Americans' everyday lives.

As the conservative counter-movement lost momentum and the Cold War ended, the office of the President had the potential to go in many different directions when dealing with race. Alleviated of at least some external pressures, particularly the fight against Communism and territorial claims over proxy states, the President would no longer have the same externally fueled impetus to improve race relations within the United States. The era between WWII and the end of the Cold War was marked by varied approaches to race relations, from the highs of the Truman and Johnson administrations to the neglect of the post-1968 presidents. When Bill Clinton was elected to office in 1992, he had many presidential models on which to draw. It was clear from the twenty years of disregard that race relations would not improve themselves, but it was also clear that negotiating the President's role in making those improvements was difficult. Unlike Truman and Johnson, who had specific issues to tackle – namely lynching and segregation, respectively – Clinton was left without a concrete manifestation of racial tensions. Approaching race relations required drawing on past successes, particularly Truman's PCCR, and a thorough evaluation of what the country lacked in terms of progress towards a more racially equal society.

With Clinton's election, control shifted from the Republicans and into the hands of the Democrats. President Clinton was certainly not the most liberal of the Left, but his undeniable support for "the right kind of affirmative action," differentiated him from his predecessors.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Reagan, Clinton saw the national government as the correct locus

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<sup>25</sup> Steven A. Holmes, "On Civil Rights, Clinton Steers Bumpy Course Between Right and Left," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1996.

for leading the country towards a “more perfect union” – that is, one with civil rights guaranteed for all. This is best evidenced by his creation and implementation of the

**Executive Action**

On June 14, 1997, President Clinton delivered the commencement speech at the University of California, San Diego and 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

that would continue to prosper. Without becoming “One America in 21<sup>st</sup> the Century,” President Clinton argued that the country’s growth would be hindered, its people would be stifled, and its legacy would be a messy one.

William Clinton had been sworn in for his second term on January 20, 1997 and the following June, President Clinton signed aforementioned 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>29</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” that prevented Americans from what Clinton saw as true equality. He felt that Americans’ prejudices and preconceived notions about race were preventing them from fulfilling America’s long conceived notions of equality and justice. President Clinton asked UC San Diego’s graduating class of 1997 to “join [him] in a great national effort to perfect the promise of America for this new time as we seek to build our more perfect Union.”<sup>30</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 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. The

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<sup>29</sup> William J. Clinton, “Executive Order 13050,” June 13, 1997.

<sup>30</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=>



President hoped this would help foster a sense of pride that would enhance the quality of life for all Americans.

Most likely, Clinton wished that the Initiative and Advisory Board would add to his legacy and enhance his relationship with the black community. 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>31</sup> 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>32</sup> Clinton's first term had established firm policies and seen great success in internal improvements; his second term offered him the opportunity to focus on developing his legacy. Wit0(t) -2 (e) 3 (r) -7 (m) -2 ( ) -1p 0Tm /F1.0 1 Tf [ (or





**The Board's Creation and Its Limits**

“One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” and its Advisory Board on Race worked between September 1997 and September 1998 to facilitate this “great national effort.”

“the issue of race relation as [America prepared] for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”<sup>41</sup> Yet the President seemed unwilling to give the Board the time it needed to truly take on an issue that had defined America since its inception.

In addition, considering the aggressive nature in which the President handled foreign policy, as well as internal policy, such as the economy or unemployment, 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. Clinton worked diligently to cultivate a strong sense of kinship between himself and minority groups, particularly African-Americans, and this work stretched as far back to his governorship in Arkansas. Given his own personal history, 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, neither when compared to his reputation with other internal struggles such as health care nor the adamantly active language surrounding the its creation.

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<sup>41</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.

### **The Initiative in Action**

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.<sup>42</sup> 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>43</sup> Essentially, the Advisory Board was to counsel the President on how to best improve race relations and suggest policy additions or changes, as well as programs the government could initiate. Its effort 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.

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. J

National Democratic Committee. Suzan D. Johnson Cook, the Senior Pastor at the Bronx Christian Fellowship, has served as the first female senior pastor for American Baptist Churches, USA, and has published numerous books. She was the only member on the Board that represented a faith community. Thomas H. Kean, former Republican governor of New Jersey and past President of Drew University, is best known for his appointment to Chairman of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, otherwise known as the 9/11 commission. Angela E. Oh gained national prominence when she became the spokesperson for the Asian American community in Los Angeles after the 1992 riots. Currently, she counsels companies on how to best eliminate discrimination from the workplace. Robert Thomas was the only appointee to represent the corporate sector as President and CEO of Nissan Motor Corporation, USA. Finally, William F. Winter, former Democratic Governor of Mississippi, was best known for his dedication to education reform in his home state and recently received the Profile in Courage Award from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum recognizing his work in the areas of education and racial reconciliation. 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.

The makeup of the Board was, in many ways, very diverse. The group represented African Americans, whites, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. They also represented a multitude of job types, ranging from Pastor to CEO of a motor company. Clinton was deliberate in these choices, and other than John Hope Franklin and Linda Chavez-Thompson, it took him weeks to deliberate the list of candidates. He hoped to

compose a board that was representative of ethnic, economic, and social dlethnic, economic, a and soci



students from elementary to college age. In this case, difference was integral; including members who were recent college graduates may have offered opportunities to reach out to wider, more diverse audiences. At the very least, it would have been one less thing for which the Board could have been criticized.

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 08006 593.28 74W n /Cs1 c



were faced with nearly, if not totally, unreachable goals and ineffective and unclear strategies to achieve them. The members, however, confronted the task before them. 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.

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 responsibility [had] been delineated into three areas.”<sup>52</sup> Those three areas were “outreach, policy planning and research, and communication.”<sup>53</sup> Members of the Board were also appointed during this time and immediately began attending press conferences, briefings, and informal meetings.<sup>54</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 throuQ Q q “ -2 (0 (a) 3 (nd ) -nu) 3 (n5n5n5n5n5n5n5n5n5r





new steps.”<sup>60</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 thoughts, among other suggestions. The letter from Richard W. Riley, which Dr. John Hope Franklin attached to the packet, encouraged campuses to participate and suggested that Board members would share received “feedback with the President to assist with the development with his report on race to the American people.”<sup>61</sup> Once again, the Board emphasized their close tie with the public, thereby enforcing the notion that their voices would not only be heard, but also that they were considered valuable. This message was integral to engaging the American public in President Clinton’s desire for an “unprecedented conversation about race.”<sup>62</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>63</sup> The program identification plan 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

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<sup>60</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>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</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>63</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.

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. Unfortunately, there is no record indicating what happened to the collection of "best practices

### **“An Unprecedented Conversation”**

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>64</sup> This conversation included an outward dialogue – one between its members and the American community – and also an internal



our history,” and further explained that whatever “we have in the way of oral communications are for the purpose leading toward actions of various kinds.”<sup>66</sup> Despite knowing the Board would accomplish little to nothing in the way of concrete action, Franklin’s words demonstrate the ferocity and dedication with which the Board members approached the creation and maintenance of the “new conversation” in which America was to engage, ultimately providing evidence of their commitment to the project.

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

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 despite the rhetoric with which they surrounded themselves that promised action beyond the conversation. And though it may be an “issue of the heart,” as well, the Board’s inherent lack of tangible power was their greatest enemy.

**“Rhetoric of Action”**

The Initiative and Advisory Board attempted to be attuned to the American people. Not only would “Promising Practices” receive national recognition, they would also be a valuable source for members of the Board and Initiative as they made their final



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>72</sup> The three ways the Board and the President foresaw achieving these goals were “constructive dialogue, study, and action (policy changes).”<sup>73</sup> Seemingly, these ends and their means accentuated what Winston called an “imperative...opportunity” to draw upon the “issue of race and racism” that members of the Initiative and Board saw at the “center of the nation’s consciousness.”<sup>74</sup> Winston’s language, in combination with the Initiative’s goals, conveyed a message of urgency – something needed to be done at what was painted as an integral moment in history as American prepared to enter the new millennium. The sense of urgency communicated in this speech, as well as many to come, articulated the Board’s need to encourage its mantra of “dialogue, study, and action.”<sup>75</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>76</sup> And though she quickly announced that she would address the complexity of the relationship between the Initiative and Board and those capable of

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<sup>72</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>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</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. (emphasis added)





Despite this seeming enthusiasm, it became clear that the Board would face many



White House before Presidential appearances, the questions posed to the President – as well as the prepared answers – demonstrated that the progress and actions of the Initiative were not matching their rhetorical promise. Answers supplied by staff included statistics about attendance at events held by the Board and the administration’s history with project coherence. None of the answers 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 and rhetoric.<sup>82</sup> For example, one question read: “How can you possibly hope to address racial disparities in education, economic opportunity and the like without a substantial infusion of federal funds?” The proposed outline for an adequate, palatable response included phrases such as “we have to be creative and make sure that existing resources are being use in the most effective ways possible.” It went on, suggesting that the President move the discussion to Clinton’s initiative to “recruit and prepare quality teachers to serve in high-poverty areas,” and ended with a mention of Housing and Urban Development “[doubling] its efforts to fight housing discrimination.”<sup>83</sup> These responses articulate the ways in which the President was instructed to avoid direct responses that could concede any sense of frustration or reaching a stalemate with the Board and its abilities.

Though the Board members –as well as the entire Initiative – were 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

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<sup>82</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.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

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 a self-perpetuated image that the members, limited by their lack of real power, were incapable of upholding and eventually led to many critiques and questions by the American public and press.



Holmes' suggestion that "Mr. Clinton himself has not given the panel any clear direction."<sup>85</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 was not working and it was not going to. One journalist suggested that the supposed "honest dialogue" was "neither."<sup>86</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>87</sup> It seemed 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 nothing. They could not ignore the over 3,000 hate crimes that were reported in 1997, 61% of which were motivated by race, yet they were not convinced Clinton's proposed solution – a national conversation – was the solution.<sup>88</sup>

In cities where the Board held meetings, media coverage was similarly ambivalent, if not outright critical. For example, one Denver newspaper covered the events in an article titled "Race talks come to Denver: Controversy follows Advisory Board as it explores issues." The article provided background information on the Board, citing the controversy over "too much talk and not enough action." Every event planned involved Clinton's vision of an "unprecedented conversation." The article, however, contrasts this skepticism with the Board members' need to promote an ever-positive

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<sup>85</sup> Stephen A. Holmes, "President Nudges His Panel to Take Action," *The New York Times*, October 1, 1997.

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opinion of their progress, citing specifically Robert Thomas who claimed that ‘There is no doubt that what the President wanted to happen is happening all over this country.’<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, these happenings were all based around dialogue and rhetoric, not action. Though there were conversations going on all over the country, which was a notable feat, the Board continued to surround itself with a rhetoric that promised action and results, diluting this accomplishment in light of the image the Board created and maintained.

Unlike the media, citizens often offered their recommendations willingly and with care. Many 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,” but recommended that the President expand the Board’s 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>90</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>91</sup> Mostly, however, citizens were concerned about Clinton’s

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<sup>89</sup> Lisa Levitt Ryckman, “Race talks come to Denver: Controversy follows Advisory Board as it explores issues,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 6. Newspaper and page numbers unspecified in archival source.

<sup>90</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>91</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.

stated proposal of an “unprecedented conversation” about race.<sup>92</sup>



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case, their disinterest in the manners in which affirmative action was failing indirectly confirmed that the Board's hand were tied when it came to implementing action.

Dr. Franklin spoke to these limitations by trying to divert attention from them. He responded to criticism about not addressing affirmative action, stating that 'We were giving attention to other ways of achieving diversity.' According to the reporter, Franklin's frustration was evident; the source of that frustration was less clear. He admitted that he was "wary of [the public]," adding that he was wary of "all of it."<sup>101</sup> He did not expound on that statement, however. Likely, Franklin was irritated both by his own limitations and the American public's narrow scope of understanding race relations. Despite the Board's best efforts to articulate their goals and strategies, the American public spent a lot of time focusing on affirmative action. This demonstrated the obstacle the Board faced in trying to relay their prerogative while simultaneously responding the public. It also highlights the limited ways in which the American public thought about race and the restrictions that the Board faced in effecting real change.

All of these critical responses and reviews certainly supported 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. The structural limitations taken by the Board opened up a much-needed debate but could not provide much the way of federal action on Americans' concerns. The "unprecedented conversation" was needed – and desired – but the American public did not understand or appreciate that the end result of this conversation would be summarization, not action.

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### **The Politics of Omission**

One of the best examples of the Board's misdirection is the glaring omission of Native Americans from the Board and Initiative, despite its claim to the diversity of its 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. 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.

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

left out of the discussion yet again, affirming feelings that their situation was one no longer of interest to the government or the American public.

Nearly a year after the Advisory Board was first announced, a young woman named Seledia Shephard told the President that “how [Native Americans] were omitted 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>104</sup> Just a few days earlier, the Initiative and the Advisory Board met in Denver, Colorado where they were greeted by protesters demanding the inclusions of

housing initiatives, and sent representatives to reservations to help improve their living conditions, among other things. The exclusion of Native Americans from the Board was an anomaly in comparison to Clinton's reputation.

The President and the Advisory Board quickly turned to relying on Laura Harris, a member of the Comanche Nation, who served as a consultant. As aforementioned, Ms. Harris was not a public face for the Board, nor was she as influential as the seven members.<sup>106</sup> 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>107</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 her 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.

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<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, no further information was found about her, suggesting further that her role was minimal.

<sup>107</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.

The omission of Native Americans was never remedied. And Ms. Winston's comment suggested the Board's disinterest in attempting to do so at all. If Americans were not already disillusioned by March of 1998, they probably were following her attempt to calm protestors. The Board responded politely, proving that their inherent ties to bureaucracy and politics were more powerful and persuasive than the insistent, and valid, demands of parts 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 was concerned for "unprecedented dialogue," it seemed that they were failing one of their foremost missions. Their disinclination to view fellow citizens equally demonstrated that the Advisory Board was not really creating a 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, such as expanding the membership of the Board. The response to the exclusion of Native Americans only supported the criticism that the Board was nothing but talk. It stands as the final piece of evidence to demonstrate the Advisory Board's impotence and inadequate understanding of race itself and race relations in America.

### **The Limits of a “Race” Initiative**

All of the practical limits of the Advisory Board – lack of time, lack of power, failure of inclusion – are indeed important parts of the Board’s absence from Clinton’s political legacy. However, the project itself, with its singular focus on racial inequality, was also at the heart of the reasons for the Initiative’s failings. No matter the reality of the difficulties of racial prejudice in America, the Board’s relied on Civil Right’s era understandings of racism, ultimately limiting the conversation from discussing myriad forms of racism and race itself, all of which inform one another. Limitations in the Board’s conceptions of race and race relations would also shape the way in which it was received by the public at large as well as its effectiveness as an initiative to effect social change.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that the societal implications and nuances attached to modern understandings of race shape the way that people react to the societal



This shortcoming is also demonstrated in the Advisory Board's generally universal – or national – approach to dealing with racial tensions. While there are undoubtedly national issues and widespread perceptions, the location of racial tensions is not at the national level. According to Chideya, “We talk of national indicators, national problems, and *national solutions* to the racial divide, but first and foremost, racial issues *are local*.”<sup>111</sup> While one of the Board's prerogatives was to “to encourage leadership at the federal, state, local, community, and individual levels to bridge racial divides,” their ultimate perspective was one of a national understanding of race relations and therefore, national solutions. If racial tensions are varied from region to region, state to state, and city to city, then national, one-size-fits-all solutions are not necessarily compatible with a particular face of racial antagonism. As Farai Chideya asks, “How can you lump together the tensions between whites and Native Americans in the West with the snared and shifting ethnic politics of a megalopolis like Los Angeles?” not to mention the legacy of slavery in the Deep South.<sup>112</sup> The short answer is that you can't. The Board faced a major obstacle in attempting to “articulate the President's vision of a just, unified America,” and it was one they were not equipped to tackle.<sup>113</sup> Once again, the Board's national perspective and limited abilities, compounded by its short tenure limited its effectiveness, in this case rendered it incapable of zooming in to the local level.

The Board was similarly negligent in regards to the demands of a changing national demographic. By the late 1990s, the chan



States was evident. Dealing with racial issues in black and white was – and is – not adequate. Chiyeda explains that where African Americans are often seen as an “everyminority,” that is, “highly visibly, often attacked, occasionally rewarded for [their]

## **The Result**

It is not surprising that the President's Advisory Board on Race submitted their final report, *One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Forging a New Future*, completed in September of 1998, without many repercussions.<sup>115</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 descriptions of successful programs for race equity and reconciliation already in place throughout the

emphasized 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>118</sup> They also recommended closely monitored welfare reform, a deeper, more thorough understanding of the connection between race and poverty, and a review of the “Administration of Justice” among minorities. These recommendations, however, were not new or groundbreaking. It contained no actionable projects or ideas for acquiring funding for new projects, but most importantly, it does recommend the continuation of the Initiative.

The Advisory Board’s short tenure is undoubtedly its greatest flaw. That fallibility, however, rests on the shoulders of former President Clinton alone. 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. Most likely, however, Clinton was incapable of putting any political capital behind the Board in the midst of his impeachment hearings due to the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Furthermore, the whole episode cost Clinton any pull in Congress. Though this answer is simplistic, the reality of the situation in mid to late 1998 is mired with this aspect of his legacy. However, the Board failed without the help of Clinton’s impeachment. Though Clinton may have been able or willing to pay more attention to the

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<sup>118</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).

Board's finding had he not been involved in the Lewinsky scandal, it does not change the fact that the Board was doomed from its onset.

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.<sup>119</sup> Though the "breadth of the panel's undertaking was impressive," its legacy seems to be cast aside or simply forgotten all together.<sup>120</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 self-congratulatory, and perhaps is as ambiguous as 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 depressing rather than forgettable.

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 chose to employ a rhetoric of action without an ability to change anything tangible. Perhaps some

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## Conclusions

Ultimately, President Clinton's Advisory Board highlights the limits of executive power as a player in the effort to reshape race relations in the United States. As Dwight Eisenhower said, "you can't change men's hearts with laws."<sup>121</sup> There is truth in this statement; one cannot expect to eradicate racism with laws and policies. What is more, the Board's failings corroborate Nina M. Moore's contention that "Race cannot be governed." Furthermore, "It cannot be accommodated by existing institutional arrangements, nor can those arrangements produce policies sufficient to redress the more entrenched elements of the race problem."<sup>122</sup> That is, federal policies and/or actions alone cannot expect to improve race relations. This examination of President Clinton's Advisory Board on Race proves Moore correct.

The Board failed for many reasons. Obviously, Clinton's scandal plagued his second term and hurt his ability to provide the Board and the Initiative with his full political and personal support. In addition, the Board's limited tenure, lack of ability to fulfill the needs of the American people, and the ramifications of omitting Native Americans all undercut its potential for true, tangible success. Above any other reason, though, is that the Board was inherently limited by its mere creation. Federal initiatives cannot withstand the dynamic, difficult demands of attempting to improve race relations. Though laws and commissions have attacked racism's manifestations – segregation, hate crimes, and so on – they cannot deconstruct the larger social institutions that uphold and propagate racist notions and practices. As a product of federal action, the Board was part of the system that has upheld racial inequality, whether or not that maintenance was

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<sup>121</sup> Shull, *American Civil Rights Policy from Truman to Clinton*, 36.

<sup>122</sup> Nina M. Moore, *Governing Race: Policy, Process, and the Policy of Race* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), xvii.

intentional. It could not escape the implications that come with being part of a larger system, including the destructive consequences of being part of a political structure. Inherent in these types of political entities created to attack social issues such as racism are limitations created by their inseparability from the world of partisan politics. Though the Board did indeed foster a national conversation, it could not result in substantial changes. Though conversation is important, the Board's further purpose in advising the President on how to improve race relations could not be realized due to its own limitations as well as the complicated understandings of race and the less tangible results of racial discrimination at the end of the century.

On the other hand, this does not rid the President of his responsibility to work consistently and constantly to maintain the promises America makes to its citizens. Perhaps it was this tenuous situation that led President Clinton to create the Initiative and the Advisory Board; simply an unspoken need or requirement to do *something*. At the very least, the Board was able to effectively surround itself in this "rhetoric of action," offering the hope that at best the President and his constituents would be able to effect change and at the very least, demonstrate the President's dedication to the maintenance of the American Promise. Past President's actions gave Clinton examples, but the fluidity and nuanced notions of race developed by the end of the century ultimately doomed even a well-intentioned attempt towards racial reconciliation.

The recent election of Barack Obama has further complicated the President's role in taking action against racism in this country. With pundits such as Adam Nagourney talking about a "post-racial America," where Obama's election has "[swept] away the last racial barrier in American politics," executive orders such as Clinton's – or Truman's –

bent on changing race relations in America may now seem to be antiquated gestures, suited only for the racial landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>123</sup> Certainly, President Clinton's and the Board's experience points to the difficulties inherent in utilizing the executive office to further the cause of civil rights. Those limitations are both intrinsic and extrinsic, created both by the President's lack of ability to inspire concrete social change and the obstacles created externally by miscommunication of the Board's goals, furthered by the restrictions inherent in its creation. The question remains, however, whether or Obama's status as the first non-white President will bolster executive action, allowing him to draw on his own experience and identity, as well as his position in the executive office to combat racism. More likely, however, his election will signal that the need – or desire – for Presidential leadership on issues of race will be relegated to the annals of the not-so-distant past.

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<sup>123</sup> Adam Nagourney, "Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2009.



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