

WILLIAM JEFFERSON CLINTON, "RACISM IN THE UNITED STATES" (16 OCTOBER 1995)

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Abstract: In "Racism in the United States," President Bill Clinton acknowledged racial differences and called upon Americans to "clean our house of racism." Maintaining that the discussion of differences was the first step in alleviating racial tension, Clinton made dialogue a centerpiece of his race initiative. Clinton's approach to civil rights and his emphasis on dialogue marked an important step in the ongoing debates over civil rights in America by illustrating a president's role in shaping such debates.

Key Words: Bill Clinton, racism, civil rights, race initiative, Million Man March

The 1995 O.J. Simpson trial was heralded as the trial of the century, a moniker that reflected the sensationalism and hype surrounding the legal drama: a black football star accused of killing his ex-wife and her companion, two high profile legal teams, and an attentive viewing audience. Indeed, the Simpson trial elicited all of the suspense of a Hollywood murder mystery. When a nearly all black jury acquitted Simpson, the drama intensified as white and black Americans "divided sharply along racial lines" responded to the verdict.<sup>1</sup> According to a survey completed by the *Washington Post*, "eight out of 10 blacks interviewed said they agreed with the decision, including 66 percent who expressed strong approval of the verdicts. But 55 percent of all whites interviewed said they disapproved of the jury's decision, including 40 percent who said they strongly disapproved."<sup>2</sup> The disagreement of whites and blacks over the Simpson verdict aggravated racial tensions and prompted the nation, including President Bill Clinton, to acknowledge the existence of America's long-standing racial divide.

On October 16, 1995, President Clinton discussed America's racial problems in his first extended remarks on race in the aftermath of the Simpson trial. In his speech, Clinton acknowledged that black and white Americans saw the world differently and tried to educate each race about the causes of these differences. Promoting a message of compassion and conciliation, Clinton encouraged all Americans to "clean our house of racism" and called for a national dialogue on race that, he argued, would set America on a path to racial harmony (35).<sup>3</sup>

Although critics, including the controversial black leader Minister Louis Farrakhan, criticized Clinton for not offering any solutions to the problems of racism and discrimination in America, Clinton maintained that dialogue was the first step in

understanding racial differences. Two years later, Clinton made dialogue the cornerstone of "One America in the 21st Century: The President's Initiative on Race," a formal program founded on the principles of "thoughtful study, constructive dialogue, and positive action."<sup>4</sup> Critics again accused Clinton of failing to offer solutions, ultimately concluding that the President's Initiative on Race was a failure.

Nevertheless, many praised Clinton for his efforts to improve race relations. His continued interest in civil rights and his concern for black Americans even led Toni Morrison to dub him the "nation's first black President"—a comparison that drew criticism from some prominent blacks.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the merits of such praise, few can deny that throughout his presidency, Clinton remained very popular within the black community. According to the U.S. Department of State, 83 percent of black voters voted for Clinton in 1992 and 84 percent voted for him in 1996.<sup>6</sup> Clinton's Initiative on Race may not have produced many tangible results, but through speeches like "Racism in the United States," Clinton announced a new era in civil rights within the United States. By embracing racial differences rather than trying to transcend them, Clinton not only declared that "race matters" in America, he offered blacks hope that their concerns would be addressed. "Racism in the United States," although it may not have initiated immediate change in America's race relations, effectively confronted symbolic racism in America and laid a foundation for future conversations about America's racial divisions and civil rights.

### *Clinton's Path to the White House*

Bill Clinton was born William Jefferson Blythe, III on August 19, 1946, in Hope, Arkansas, three months after his father died in a car accident.<sup>7</sup> Clinton and his mother, Virginia Dell Blythe, moved into her parents' home in Hope where Clinton spent the next four years. In 1950, Blythe married Roger Clinton, the man whom Clinton would come to refer to as "Daddy." In 1956, she gave birth to his only brother, Roger Cassidy Clinton.<sup>8</sup> Shortly thereafter, the family moved to Hot Springs, Arkansas where Clinton spent the remainder of his childhood.

After graduating from high school in 1964, Clinton enrolled in the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, a program designed to prepare students for leadership roles in international affairs.<sup>9</sup> In Washington, D.C., he attended school and, as he wrote in his application for a Rhodes Scholarship a few years later, began to "prepare for the life of a practicing politician."<sup>10</sup> In addition to taking classes, Clinton worked on a number of political campaigns and assisted Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AR) as a clerk for the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations committee. Although Clinton received high marks during his first two years of college, his political activities eventually took a toll. As Clinton recalled in his memoir, *My Life*, his "formal studies increasingly fought a losing battle with politics, personal experience, and private explorations."<sup>11</sup>

Those same political aspirations helped him win a Rhodes Scholarship and after graduating from Georgetown in 1968, he studied at Oxford for two years. In 1970, he enrolled in law school at Yale University. He completed his law degree in 1973 and accepted a teaching position at the University of Arkansas Law School at Fayetteville.

Two years later, Clinton married Hillary Rodham, a fellow law student he met at Yale. In 1980, Rodham gave birth to Chelsea, their only child.

Clinton's political career included both triumphs and setbacks. In 1974, Clinton lost a bid for the Arkansas state legislature. Two years later, he won the election for Attorney General and, in 1978, he ran for governor and won. In 1980, Clinton suffered a devastating defeat in his reelection campaign. According to Jeremy D. Mayer, he lost his bid in part because of his opponent's "adroit exploitation of racial fears."<sup>12</sup> A few months prior to the election, President Jimmy Carter had resettled more than 20,000 Cuban refugees at a military base in Arkansas. The relocation program frightened and angered many local residents who did not want the black refugees, many of whom had criminal records, in their community.<sup>13</sup> When riots broke out among the refugees, resident concerns were further elevated, producing "weeks of crisis in Arkansas," for which Clinton was "ill-prepared."<sup>14</sup> Clinton's opponent seized upon the opportunity to reinforce the public's fears, running a television advertisement that featured grainy images of the black Cubans rioting. The campaign ad further compounded the other "problems and mistakes" Clinton made during his first term as governor.<sup>15</sup> After losing the governorship, Clinton returned to practicing law.

Mayer asserts that Clinton's later attitudes toward race and any number of other issues "cannot be understood outside the context of this deeply personal rejection," which, according to Mayer, "drove Clinton into the depths of despair."<sup>16</sup> Clinton admitted as much in his own memoir. Describing the defeat as a "near-death experience," Clinton claimed that it forced him to "be more sensitive to the political problems inherent in progressive politics."<sup>17</sup> He added: "if I hadn't been defeated, I probably would never have become President."<sup>18</sup> Two years later, Clinton announced his plans to run for governor once more. In one of his first television campaign ads, he reflected on how he had "learned from defeat that 'you can't lead without listening.'"<sup>19</sup> Clinton won that election and continued to serve as governor of Arkansas until 1993, when he took the oath of office as the forty-second president of the United States.

The 1980 gubernatorial election was not the first time Clinton had to deal with racial issues. As a young boy growing up in Arkansas, Clinton witnessed first hand the devastating effects of racism, segregation, and prejudice. He wrote in his memoir that it was "rare to find an uneducated rural southerner without a racist bone in his body."<sup>20</sup> Clinton credited his grandfather, however, with teaching him to treat black Americans with kindness and compassion and with encouraging him to look past differences in color. The civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Clinton added, further shaped his understanding of the need for racial equality and harmony. He recalled how events like the 1957 high school crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, and the race riots in the mid-1960s left a lasting impression on him and motivated him to speak out in support of civil rights.

Clinton, however, recognized the limitations of political action on issues of race. David Maraniss explains that Clinton expressed those concerns even before entering public office. Maraniss recalls that during the American Legion Boys' Nation mock legislation session in July of 1963—one month before King's speech—"Clinton's Nationalists," the leading civil rights proponents at the conference, declared: "Racial

discrimination is a cancerous disease and must be eliminated . . . But legislation alone cannot change the minds and hearts of men."<sup>21</sup> The high school participants identified education as the "primary tool we must employ," and insisted that change must begin "in the home, in the church, and in the schools."<sup>22</sup> More than thirty years later, Clinton advanced a similar approach in his "President's Initiative on Race." He explained that the initiative's panel would "help to educate Americans about the facts surrounding race" and promote dialogue and understanding.<sup>23</sup> But, he insisted: "in the cause of building one America, all citizens must serve. . . . Government must play its role, but much of the work must be done by the American people as citizen service."<sup>24</sup> Echoing his past proposal for eliminating racism in the United States, Clinton once again stressed the importance of education and personal responsibility.

Clinton's ease and familiarity with blacks helped him gain popularity within the black community and secure the black vote in almost every political contest he entered.<sup>25</sup> His "formidable personal magnetism," which Mayer assets "seemed colorblind," helped Clinton appeal to other minority voters as well.<sup>26</sup> In a 1993 speech, Clinton acknowledged the minority community's role in his political success:

I would not be here tonight; I would never have been reelected Governor of Arkansas in 1982; I would not have been elected President of the United States through all those tough primaries if it hadn't been for African-American and Hispanic voters and Asian voters, people who were different from me, voting for me. I wouldn't be here.<sup>27</sup>

Although Clinton demonstrated a dedication to ending racism and racial injustices, he never fully committed himself to one group. Maraniss writes that as governor, Clinton "used his power to accomplish many of the integrationist goals" he had.<sup>28</sup> "But as a politician seeking to survive in a state dominated by conservative white voters . . . Clinton was not always able or willing to assist the causes of black activists."<sup>29</sup> Mayer adds that during his first presidential term, Clinton "as he did in Arkansas . . . repaid his black supporters with appointments but did not often address race as a policy question."<sup>30</sup> Seemingly recognizing the threat of alienating potential supporters, Clinton was careful not to align himself too closely with any special interest or identity groups.

Clinton strategically negotiated his position on racial policy as well. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles write that Clinton "frequently turned to questions of race and America's enduring struggle with racial division in the definition of his public and presidential image."<sup>31</sup> But to the dismay of both conservatives and liberals, he refused to position himself on one side of a debate. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles explain: "the clarity of black and white was something Clinton refused to acknowledge and tried to blunt in both his policy pronouncements and his many image reconstructions."<sup>32</sup> Adopting a centrist position, Clinton called for compromise on issues of race and tried to find policies and approaches that would appeal to both liberals and conservatives. Although the centrist approach is "attractive in the abstract," Paul J. Quirk and William Cunion point out, "it is likely to pose difficulties in practice."<sup>33</sup> The specific policies of such a program, they write, "will often be hard to sell, if indeed they even exist."<sup>34</sup>

Clinton's approach to race seemed to experience this difficulty. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles write that Clinton's "continuing quest for compromise (frequently on questions of race) often frustrated and militated against powerful grammars of political understanding."<sup>35</sup> As a result, Clinton was "unable to fully accomplish much on racial issues aside from the symbolic."<sup>36</sup>

Despite Clinton's ambivalence toward issues of race, he generated praise from many in the black community. DeWayne Wickham wrote in July 2005, "Clinton was not this nation's first black president, but he almost certainly was the next best thing."<sup>37</sup> Why was Clinton so popular among black voters? How did he come to represent the hopes and dreams of so many American blacks in the 1990s? In order to answer those questions, we must examine Clinton's rhetoric about racism in America.

### *Racial Tension in the 1990s*

The 1990s brought a number of developments that exposed America's racial divide and thrust cultural differences into the national spotlight.<sup>38</sup> First, the videotaped beating of African American motorist Rodney King by four white police officers on March 3, 1991, called attention to police brutality and forced Americans "to see the dirty underside of our institutions."<sup>39</sup> Armed with Taser stun guns and batons, four officers brutally attacked the unarmed King, prompting a national uproar and setting off a debate over treatment of blacks by police around the country. An all white jury's "not guilty" verdict cast further doubt on the fairness of the justice system and caused some angry protesters to respond with violence and rioting in south-central Los Angeles. Drawing national and international attention to America's racial problems, the King trial belied the myth of the United States as a great ethnic "melting pot."<sup>40</sup>

In 1995, the O.J. Simpson trial again drew attention to America's racial divide. Simpson, a black and former professional football star, was accused of murdering his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and a male friend in her California home. The news media quickly leapt on the story and saturated the air waves with intimate details of the investigation and trial, allowing Americans to draw their own conclusions about the case. The nation's response following Simpson's acquittal made it appear that those conclusions were largely determined by their skin color. According to the *Cleveland Call and Post*, "a large majority of African-Americans" celebrated Simpson's "fair trial" and "savored the verdict of a justice system that rarely works on their behalf."<sup>41</sup> At the same time, however, the paper reported that "nearly 70 percent of whites polled" in the United States "became unraveled at the seams following the acquittal," convinced that a "nearly all black jury sided with one of their own, therefore, giving a blood thirsty killer his freedom."<sup>42</sup> Of course, not everybody reacted to the Simpson verdict based on race. But as the *Boston Globe* reported, "whatever the legal merits of the Simpson verdict, it was a setback for those favoring a race-neutral culture."<sup>43</sup>

Like the King trial, the Simpson verdict aggravated racial divisions in America and prompted many, including President Clinton, to acknowledge "differences of perceptions" between black and white citizens.<sup>44</sup> However, throughout the Simpson trial President Clinton remained fairly silent, and after the verdict he only briefly remarked

that the nation should accept the Simpson verdict and move on. The *Atlanta Journal* echoed the President's brief statement: "The jury heard the evidence and rendered its verdict. Our system of justice requires respect for their decision. At this moment our thoughts and prayers should be with the families of the victims of this terrible crime."<sup>45</sup> According to Marc Sandalow in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Clinton's response reflected the desire of most politicians to avoid the controversy surrounding the trial.<sup>46</sup>

The Million Man March, which was scheduled for October that same year in Washington, D.C., threatened to further aggravate racial tensions in America. In March 1995, Nation of Islam leader Minister Louis Farrakhan called upon "one million disciplined, committed, and dedicated black men, from all walks of life in America" to march in Washington, D.C., in support of reconciliation, responsibility, and atonement.<sup>47</sup> According to the vision statement written by Farrakhan, the march would convey to the world a "vastly different picture" of the black male, "publicly proclaim[ing] to the global community" that black men were "prepared and moving forward" to unify their families and build their communities.<sup>48</sup>

Many skeptics feared, however, that the Million Man March would only exacerbate the racial differences exposed by the verdicts in the King and Simpson cases. Farrakhan's extremist views and his reputation for allegedly racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic remarks, made it difficult for some to separate the positive vision of the Million Man March from its controversial messenger. Many black and white Americans were hesitant to support the march out of concern that a statement supporting its goals would be taken as an endorsement of Farrakhan. The *Washington Post* commented on the unusual silence that greeted the announcement of the march: "Normally loquacious politicians and possible presidential candidates, such as President Clinton, Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-KS), House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and Colin L. Powell, initially stepped back rather than forward in the face of widely divergent racial perceptions of the Simpson verdicts and the growing controversy over the organizational role of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan in Monday's march of black men in the capital."<sup>49</sup> Most politicians, it seemed, wanted to avoid getting caught up in the volatile racial climate of the mid 1990s.

Garth Pauley notes that "modern presidents inevitably face demands that they speak publicly about the nation's racial problems."<sup>50</sup> The racial climate of the time, the circumstances surrounding the Million Man March, and Farrakhan's emerging leadership of the black community created just such a demand for Clinton. According to the *Washington Post*, Clinton "agonized" over whether to respond publicly to the Million Man March, "both over what to say and when to say it: He didn't want to have his agenda driven by the sensationalism of the Simpson case, nor was he sure he wanted his words to be heard amid the clamor and controversy over today's march."<sup>51</sup> Carol Gelderman, however, offered a less dramatic account. She asserts that Clinton "had planned to speak about racial reconciliation since the O.J. Simpson verdict."<sup>52</sup> Disturbed by the racial division following the jury's announcement, she continues, "he decided to make it on that particular day after a tactical debate within his inner circle."<sup>53</sup>

Reports from those inside the White House conveyed a similar account. In an October 6, 1995, press briefing, White House press secretary Mike McCurry explained

that the President supported people coming together to express concern about values and personal responsibility, but added: "He is not endorsing this march. He's not saying that this march is a good idea."<sup>54</sup> In a press conference four days later, Clinton briefly discussed the racial divide in America and explained that he "may have some more to say about it in the next few days."<sup>55</sup> On October 12, McCurry told the media that the President had not yet decided whether to discuss racial issues in a speech already scheduled for the morning of the march. McCurry stated: "it does not seem likely to me that he will be making some major policy address on the subject of race on Monday."<sup>56</sup> The next day, however, the White House announced that Clinton would abandon his planned campaign speech and instead would "lay out in a philosophical way some of the things that he thinks are suggested by the recent debate and discussion in this country about the subject of race."<sup>57</sup> McCurry added that Clinton would "talk in a philosophical vein about what obligations Americans have to each other" and discuss how they could "come together and address some of the profound divisions that do exist in our society."<sup>58</sup> Clinton's speech writers began drafting the speech on Friday and worked with Clinton up until 3:00 A.M. on the morning of the Million Man March developing his final copy. "There's not a word in that speech untouched by the president," David Shipley, Clinton's speechwriter, reported.<sup>59</sup> On the morning of October 16, 1995, President Clinton thus delivered his first extended comments on race since the Simpson trial, speaking more than fifteen hundred miles away as crowds began gathering on the mall in Washington, D.C., for the Million Man March.

### *The "Racism in the United States" Speech*

Martín Carcasson and Mitchell F. Rice write that the President of the United States is "perhaps the most likely figure to be able to rise above the various factions concerning race" in this country and to make a "substantial contribution to bettering the situation."<sup>60</sup> However, "talking about race" is a "difficult enterprise" in the United States, Carcasson and Rice note, because of the "heavily fractured" nature of the audience. In order for a president to make progress, he needs to "transcend at least some of the differences" among the audience members and achieve some sort of common ground.<sup>61</sup>

Rhetorical scholars note that past presidents have often tried to transcend racial differences by emphasizing Americans' shared values and national identity. For example, Vanessa Beasley found that in state of the union messages and inaugural addresses, presidents defined American identity "ideationally, explaining that the civil religion required citizens to transcend their differences and that they can do so only by adopting a set of proper attitudes."<sup>62</sup> Pauley has described presidential rhetoric on civil rights similarly. He notes that modern presidents commonly use a "constitutional" vocabulary that allows them to "transcend national differences of opinion about racial equality."<sup>63</sup> By grounding their appeals in American values like individual rights, freedom, and equality, modern presidents have suggested that the nation has not always lived up to its principles and urged support for civil rights in universal terms. This seemingly inclusive strategy, however, runs the risk of side-stepping questions of responsibility,

inequality, and economics that perpetuate the racial divide. Presidents who try to disassociate racial problems from concrete issues, Beasley suggests, often do more harm than good.<sup>64</sup>

Modern presidents who seek to transcend racial differences must now also consider a "new form of antiblack prejudice" that has arisen in the United States: "symbolic racism."<sup>65</sup> According to Michael Hughes, symbolic racism is a "new form of resistance to change in the racial status quo" that is "rooted in deep-seated feelings of social morality and propriety and in early-learned racial fears and stereotypes."<sup>66</sup> Symbolic racism represents the belief of many white Americans that black Americans "violate traditional U.S. values and thus do not deserve any special help."<sup>67</sup> Frequently, he explains, this attribute is manifested in white Americans' disapproval of social programs designed to promote equality for African Americans. Symbolic racism therefore poses additional challenges for those who try to improve race relations. Modern presidents who seek to mend the racial divide, for example, must not only address the "old-fashioned racism" of the past, but also the "symbolic racism" that exists in U.S. culture. President Clinton, I will argue, confronted both types of racism in "Racism in the United States."

Beasley has argued that President Clinton's "candid" assessment of America's racial problems and his emphasis on national and individual accountability marked a new approach to presidential civil rights discourse.<sup>68</sup> Clinton's critics, however, described his call for a national dialogue on race—first introduced in his "Racism in the United States" speech and later featured in "One America in the 21st Century: The President's Initiative on Race"—as too much talk and not enough action.

Clinton's "Racism in the United States," delivered on the morning of the Million Man March, is significant to understanding both Clinton's approach to race issues and the ongoing civil rights debates in the United States. The speech not only demonstrates the compassionate and conciliatory approach that helped Clinton gain the support of so many African Americans, it also contributes to our understanding of how presidential rhetoric can serve as "symbolic action."<sup>69</sup> Unlike past presidents who attempted to transcend racial differences, Clinton offered a candid discussion of racism in the United States. He acknowledged that racial differences existed and tried to create a sense of unity by recognizing and celebrating Americans' diversity. Although "Racism in the United States" may not have produced immediate changes in the racial status quo, the speech effectively demonstrated Clinton's commitment to eliminating symbolic racism in America and gave African Americans hope that change could occur.

Adopting the centrist approach that seemed to define his governing strategy, President Clinton seemingly stepped forward as a mediator between the races and worked to promote racial reconciliation and compromise in his "Racism in the United States" address. In the process, Clinton articulated a rhetoric of identification and understanding, designed to create unity between black and white Americans, while educating his white listeners about the inequalities in society. He even offered the Million Man March itself as evidence that black and white Americans shared many of the same personal qualities and social values. Calling upon all Americans to engage in



their own dialogues on race, Clinton urged both black and white Americans to "clean our house of racism." (35)

Clinton began his speech by talking about the "rift" that was "tearing at the heart of America" (11). "In recent weeks," he stated, "every one of us has been made aware of a simple truth: white Americans and black Americans often see the same world in drastically different ways." (10) Clinton's acknowledgement of what Beasley calls a "division of *ideas*" among whites and blacks "was unprecedented in American history."<sup>70</sup> Although the divide has always existed in American society, Beasley notes that past presidents had promoted a rhetoric of inclusion and espoused an "ideational model of national identity" that minimized race.<sup>71</sup> Clinton, however, recognized that race caused black and white Americans to "experience the threats of modern life to personal security, family values, and strong communities" in different ways. (12)

This admission not only illustrated Clinton's own observations, it echoed the rise of identity politics in the United States in the late-twentieth century. Amy Gutmann explains that the "failure of conventional interest group politics and government to concern themselves with the civic equality, equal freedom, and opportunity of disadvantaged women, people of color, and the disabled" led to the formation of organized identity groups in U.S. politics.<sup>72</sup> Drawing upon their shared social markers and their mutual identification, these groups stress the importance of difference and call upon the government to promote equality. Even though Clinton's recognition of difference is likely a response to the shift toward identity politics, his willingness to talk about these differences is characteristic of his new approach to civil rights.

By drawing attention to the differing points of view, Clinton thus affirmed that the racial divide was, in fact, real. His acknowledgement that race matters in American society not only granted legitimacy to African Americans' claims of racial inequality, but also justified particular programs designed to address these issues. Speaking directly to white's deep-moral feelings about black Americans, Clinton paved the way for a discussion about racial inequalities and differences. He even suggested that having the racial divide "so clearly out in the open" created an opportunity for Americans to learn more about racial differences and to unite as one America (17). His race rhetoric thus broke from the traditional "colorblind rhetoric" that, Carrie Crenshaw notes, "makes its most significant mark in the political crucible of race relations" as a "symbolic inducement" to "transcend the race problem."<sup>73</sup> Asking black and white Americans to confront rather than transcend racial differences, Clinton announced that the time had come for a new national dialogue on race that promoted compassion and conciliation between the races.

Clinton took the lead in the conversation and described some of the truths and distortions that prevented blacks and whites from unifying. He acknowledged the existence of two Americas and tailored a message specifically to black Americans and white Americans. Instead of emphasizing the concerns of one side over the other, however, Clinton called for compromise and understanding.

Clinton first introduced white Americans to the roots of black pain, explaining that African Americans suffered from unequal treatment "first in law and later in fact" (21). In an apparent reference to the Rodney King incident, he stated, "Still today, too

many of our police officers play by the rules of the bad old days" (22). Clinton's firm declaration suggested that the President generally agreed with blacks who complained of unfair treatment by police and acknowledged that old-fashioned racism was still a factor in contemporary society. It was "beyond wrong," he stated, when blacks had to fear the police paid to protect them (22). It also was "terribly wrong" that black men were more likely to be incarcerated or become victims of violent crime (23). And it was right for blacks "to think something is terribly wrong" when examining the statistics on crime, drug use, and college graduation rates among African American men (23). Clinton's list of injustices helped to affirm his point that it was just "not true" that African Americans had been "some sort of a protected class" (24). Those who believed that blacks were getting "more than their fair share" through government programs were simply ignoring the facts. By illuminating the injustices that black Americans still experienced, Clinton's message to white America refuted the assumption that blacks received special treatment.

Turning to his black listeners, Clinton called upon African Americans to "understand and acknowledge" the "roots of white fear"(26). He stated, "There is a legitimate fear of the violence that is too prevalent in our urban areas"(26). He noted that it was not racist to "recoil in disgust" at the views of gang members as reported in a national survey (28). White Americans did not understand why black people "put up" with gangs or drugs in their neighborhoods, nor was it racist for them to question the culture of welfare-dependency, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and absent fatherhood among blacks (28). These problems, Clinton argued, "cannot be broken by social programs unless there is first more personal responsibility"(28). Emphasizing problems most closely identified with impoverished black communities, Clinton urged his black listeners to acknowledge that there was some legitimacy behind white fears.

Clinton took special care not to blame blacks for the ills they faced or white Americans for perpetuating racism. Instead, he asked all Americans to "take responsibility" for themselves, their conduct, and their attitudes (35). Emphasizing the need for both national and individual accountability, Clinton declared, "America, we must clean our house of racism" (35). Clinton's plan for racial reconciliation included an open dialogue about race, the promotion of "real opportunity" (44) for all Americans, and the assurance of a "good education" (45) for all children and adults. Identifying these measures as first steps in bridging the racial divide, Clinton encouraged all Americans to stand up against racism and to unite behind his initiatives to promote racial harmony.

Clinton's emphasis on individual accountability illustrated his new approach to civil rights and affirmed race-conscious Americans' existing efforts to promote change.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, however, it placed the onus for change on those who still harbored feelings of difference or animosity toward other races. As Hughes notes, symbolic racism was a powerful force resisting change, as many whites remained convinced that blacks already benefited from special treatment.<sup>75</sup> So too did many black Americans resist Clinton's plan to acknowledge their own responsibility for racial divisions. Perhaps even more than white Americans' unwillingness to confront their own racist attitudes, criticism from prominent blacks jeopardized Clinton's initiative on race.

Louis Farrakhan and the Million Man March posed perhaps the greatest threat to Clinton's vision of racial unity. Mass support for the march might seem to suggest that many blacks embraced Farrakhan's call for black solidarity and opposed Clinton's vision of racial unity and reconciliation. As the *Washington Post* reported, Clinton hoped that by speaking on the day of the march, he could "ensure that his words were topical, and could perhaps guide the way white Americans especially interpreted the event."<sup>76</sup> George Stephanopoulos, one of Clinton's senior advisors, wrote that he advised Clinton: "You can praise the values behind the March if you want, but keep Farrakhan out of it."<sup>77</sup> Clinton did just that. In a seemingly strategic move, Clinton tried to upstage Farrakhan by delivering his major address on race just hours before Farrakhan spoke at the Million Man March.

Ignoring the more radical views of its leadership, Clinton described the Million Man March as evidence of the black community's "old-fashioned American values" (30). He applauded the black men for openly asserting that "without changes in the black community and within real individuals, real change for our society will not come"(29). He encouraged white Americans to recognize the march's "larger truth" that blacks shared white Americans' fears and convictions (29). Noting that "most black Americans still do work hard, care for their families, pay their taxes, and obey the law," Clinton portrayed the march's emphasis on personal responsibility, family, and community as an affirmation of values that white Americans could embrace (30). The Million Man March, Clinton suggested, clearly showed that blacks embraced the same traditional American values that whites embraced.

This interpretation of the Million Man March differed greatly from that of its controversial leader, Minister Farrakhan. Clinton acknowledged his differences, saying: "Of course, some of those in the march do have a history that is far from its message of atonement and reconciliation"(15). Although Clinton never mentioned Farrakhan by name, he clearly tried to minimize the minister's role in the march. He said, "one million men are right to be standing up for personal responsibility. But one million men do not make right one man's message of malice and division"(15). Differentiating Farrakhan's goals from those of the majority of participants in the march, Clinton said, "Let us pray that those who have spoken for hatred and division in the past will turn away from that past and give voice to the true message of those ordinary Americans who march" (16). By separating the controversial Farrakhan from the march's message of responsibility, reconciliation, and atonement, Clinton was able to present the event as evidence that white and black Americans actually shared similar beliefs, values, and convictions. American values, once again, became the "common ground" that Carcasson and Rice described as essential to racial reconciliation.<sup>78</sup>

Clinton's "Racism in the United States" offered the president an opportunity to teach both black and white Americans about their misinterpretations of one another and to lay the foundation for a new dialogue about race in America. "Today we face a choice," he said. "One way leads to further separation and bitterness and more lost futures. The other way, a path of courage and wisdom, leads to unity, to reconciliation, to a rich opportunity for all Americans to make the most of the lives God gave them"(17). Urging Americans to choose the second path, Clinton declared his own

commitment to real social change, stating, "I will do my part" (63). Clinton, however, tried to limit the government's role in resolving racial problems by emphasizing that legislation alone could not create equality among the races. He claimed that "this issue of race is not about government or political leaders, it is about what is in the hearts and minds and life of the American people"(47).

Although other presidents had also acknowledged that racism still existed in America, Clinton stressed the need for individuals to take personal responsibility for promoting racial harmony. He advanced a centrist position and called upon all Americans to "build on this effort, to share equally in the promise of America"(37). In order to do that, he stated, "your house, too must be cleaned of racism"(37). Until all Americans assumed responsibility for their behaviors and their beliefs, he concluded, "there will be no progress"(47). Clinton's emphasis on dialogue as an approach to civil rights would later become the source of great contention. Claire Jean Kim asserts that Clinton's "focus was no longer on curtailing the harms that one group afflicted on one another (or others) but on getting everyone to get along."<sup>79</sup> To some, that unfairly blamed blacks by relieving whites of their responsibility for racism in America.

Clinton's "Racism in the United States" reflected both the racial tension of the time and concerns that Farrakhan and the Million Man March would exacerbate those tensions. Speaking on the morning of the Million Man March, Clinton tried to preempt Farrakhan's anticipated separatist rhetoric and promote conciliation among the races. Clinton acted as the mediator between black and white Americans and promoted honest, candid discussions about racial differences and disparities. His new approach to civil rights issues offered hope that America could begin mending its racial divide. At the same time, however, it suggested that the government's involvement would be minimal.

Many took notice of the speech's promise. Some journalists praised Clinton's speech, calling it one of the "most powerful"<sup>80</sup> and "most sweeping"<sup>81</sup> speeches of his presidency. Others, like Susan Page, wrote that it "may be the bluntest presidential speech on race relations since the civil rights debates of the 1960s."<sup>82</sup> Mary McGrory called it the "best speech" on race "since Lyndon Johnson's 'We Shall Overcome.'"<sup>83</sup> Terry Edwards, Clinton's speechwriter, explained that as the only known African American in speechwriting, it was for him a "defining speech."<sup>84</sup> U.S. Representative John D. Lewis (D-GA), who advised Clinton as he was writing the speech, told CNN that he thought the president "spoke in a very forceful, in a straightforward and aggressive manner. . . I think the president said what had to be said."<sup>85</sup> CNN also reported that Akbar Muhammad, the international representative of the Nation of Islam, called the speech "the greatest speech of [Clinton's] life."<sup>86</sup> Whites and blacks from various political perspectives, it seemed, took note of the symbolic significance of Clinton's speech.

Not everyone, most notably Minister Farrakhan, interpreted the president's message so positively. A few hours later, Farrakhan addressed an estimated 800,000 men at the Million Man March in Washington, D.C., along with a national television audience. He criticized the president for failing to "dig deep enough at the malady that divides black and white in order to affect a solution to the problem."<sup>87</sup> He demanded

that the president "clear the scales" from his eyes and "give ear to what we say."<sup>88</sup> Insisting that the president "perhaps" might "save this great nation" if he listened to the "beat of our hearts and the pulsating rhythm of the truth," Farrakhan called for more attention to the African American community's problems and demands for change.<sup>89</sup>

Farrakhan's suggestion that Clinton did not go far enough was echoed by political leaders. House Speaker Newt Gingrich, for example, said, "I think, quite frankly, that the president's halfway there. I commend him for trying to move in the right direction . . . but I think we need to move beyond sensitivity training and talking with each other about race."<sup>90</sup> The day after the march, a bipartisan group of House lawmakers, including African American Representatives John Lewis (D-GA) and Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), urged Clinton to appoint a panel to lead a commission on race. "We believe a new presidentially appointed, bipartisan commission with impeccable credentials may lead to a healthy discussion and a new era of progress between the races, both of which this country desperately needs," the group wrote.<sup>91</sup> Other leaders criticized Clinton for not taking a firm enough stand against Farrakhan. For instance, Senate Majority leader Bob Dole said, "I am shocked and dismayed that President Clinton did not find the moral courage to denounce Louis Farrakhan by name in his speech today in Texas. Farrakhan is a racist and anti-Semite, unhinged by hate. He has no place in American public life, and all who would lead must say so."<sup>92</sup> These sorts of criticisms would continue to plague Clinton's race initiative in the late 1990s and undermine his efforts to mend the divisions between black and white Americans.

At first glance, Clinton's speech may seem to have little impact on the ongoing civil rights debates. His "philosophical" address did not motivate many Americans to dramatically change their ways and his message was greatly overshadowed by Farrakhan and the Million Man March. Yet, in some ways, "Racism in the United States" might be judged a rhetorical success. At a time when racial tensions were high, Clinton stepped forward to address the concerns of both blacks and whites. He strengthened his commitment to alleviating racial inequalities and laid the foundation for his 1997 Initiative on Race. Although many Americans continue to resist confronting racial issues in America, Clinton's efforts and accomplishments are not lost. By stepping forward as President and declaring that race matters, Clinton offered new hope that Americans could move toward a more racially equal society by confronting the *symbolic racism* that stands in the way of civil rights for all.

### *The Legacy of the "Racism in the United States" Speech*

In 2004, Beasley wrote, "The modern president who will be remembered for, among other things, trying to put race back in the national agenda was of course Bill Clinton."<sup>93</sup> As Beasley noted, Clinton's approach to civil rights differed from previous presidents. Instead of looking past racial differences, Clinton emphasized how blacks and whites viewed the world differently and stressed the need for all races to take responsibility for the problems. He celebrated racial diversity and encouraged Americans to come together to discuss and even embrace the value of racial diversity.

As Beasley concluded, "there seemed to be a newfound emphasis on both national and individual accountability in Clinton's rhetoric."<sup>94</sup>

Pauley has observed that "presidential rhetoric in the form of public teaching can serve an important function in the polity, and it is a special type of action—symbolic action."<sup>95</sup> Understanding Clinton's symbolic politics and action, both Darlene Clark Hine and Sharon D. Wright have observed, is essential to understanding his popularity among African Americans. Hines writes that Clinton became a "proficient practitioner of the politics of symbolism," a "talent" that, she argues, "proved to be enormously appealing to some African Americans."<sup>96</sup> Wright asserts that Clinton's symbolic actions "won him even greater levels of admiration from the majority of African Americans."<sup>97</sup> Both Hines and Wright refer to many instances when Clinton showed compassion towards blacks and acknowledged past offenses committed against them. Not surprisingly, both offer Clinton's 1997 "Presidential Initiative on Race" as one of his many symbolic actions toward African Americans.

In "Racism in the United States," Clinton laid the foundation for the formal governmental initiative on race launched two years later.<sup>98</sup> Announced in a May 1997 speech at the University of California at San Diego, the "President's Initiative on Race" promised to "prepare America for the 21st century with a strategy of opportunity for all, responsibility from all, and an American community of all our citizens."<sup>99</sup> The initiative called for a diverse panel of experts to help educate Americans about the facts surrounding issues of race—including but not limited to tension between blacks and whites—and to promote local discussions about those issues. The panel's charge would also include finding, developing, and recommending concrete solutions to America's race problems. Adding government support and funding to Clinton's goal to help "lift the heavy burden of race from our children's future," the initiative offered Americans a new route to a unified America.<sup>100</sup> That path, as Beasley notes, was "paved with talk" and "honest, direct conversation" about Americans' differences, but also called for action.<sup>101</sup> Carcasson and Rice note that dialogue was "not advanced as the solution, but only as the prerequisite to positive action."<sup>102</sup>

Clinton's heavy emphasis on conversation, however, prompted much of the criticism of his initiative.<sup>103</sup> Carcasson and Rice have noted how some critics labeled Clinton's race initiative "naïve," "rudderless," "blind to reality," a "dud," and "timid."<sup>104</sup> Many skeptics dismissed the whole idea of a national dialogue on race as a diversionary tactic designed to deflect attention away from the Paula Jones scandal Clinton was involved in at the time. Carcasson and Rice argue that the Jones scandal and later the Monica Lewinsky scandal greatly inhibited the initiative's success because they drew attention away from Clinton's efforts. They write that the "end result may have been the most difficult audience problem imaginable: nobody was really listening."<sup>105</sup>

Carcasson and Rice identified other significant problems that inhibited the initiative's success. First, the race initiative itself "suffered from a lack of focus and solidarity."<sup>106</sup> Carcasson and Rice argued that Clinton's rhetoric "exhibited an inclination toward class and geography-based concepts, downplayed the role of past and present discrimination and racism when discussing what caused racial inequalities, and stressed personal responsibility." His advisory board, however, emphasized the "enduring legacy

of past and presently active discrimination" and openly declared that "yes, race matters."<sup>107</sup> During the fifteen-month initiative, they note, Clinton and the advisory board were never able to reconcile his preoccupation with class and their preoccupation with race. Any attempts Clinton may have made to create the appearance of unity and consistency between the messages fell short.

Second, Clinton was unable to overcome the fragmentation of his audience. Carcasson and Rice suggest that Clinton's attempts to elevate race to the top of his agenda "likely worked to galvanize his opponents against it."<sup>108</sup> This division became most apparent on the issue of affirmative action. Not only did Clinton have difficulty reconciling the initiative's call for personal responsibility with his defense of affirmative action programs, he was not able to generate support for his position from either party. Carcasson and Rice claim that the conservatives could not get past Clinton's defense of affirmative action and the liberals did not think that Clinton had gone far enough in his critiques of white America. "In the end," they write, "the initiative received the support of neither side and stalled."<sup>109</sup>

Third, Carcasson and Rice argue that Clinton's rhetorical strategies "played well in theory but poor in practice." Indeed, critics were quick to point out that Clinton spoke in favor of racial harmony, while "avoiding mention of race-specific solutions to discrimination," a pattern that Mayer referred to as "Classic Clinton."<sup>110</sup> Carcasson and Rice observe that Clinton's lofty rhetoric "may have worked well to inspire, but did little to overcome real everyday difficulties."<sup>111</sup> That inspiration, however, "failed to motivate the majority of Americans" who did not consider race an important issue in their lives. Although they claimed that it was too early for a "final judgment" on Clinton's race initiative, Carcasson and Rice concluded that in its first year, the initiative "clearly failed to achieve what it had promised."<sup>112</sup>

The "President's Initiative on Race," however, was not a complete failure. Critics of Clinton's approach, Pauley argues, "should investigate how a president's words might affect national attitudes on race."<sup>113</sup> Because "citizens often look to the president for meaningful rhetoric" on civil rights, Pauley asserts, the "persuasive powers of the office" give the president an opportunity to "induce the citizenry to move toward a greater good it might have ignored or resisted if not for powerful symbolic action."<sup>114</sup> By speaking about racial differences throughout his time in the White House, Clinton engaged citizens on an "individual and collective moral level, in addition to shaping public policy."<sup>115</sup> His assessment of the race problem and his new approach to promoting racial reconciliation and compassion dealing with racial differences had at least the potential to move the "nation toward overcoming its racial problems."<sup>116</sup>

Clinton seemed to recognize this possibility as well. In his 1996 book *Between Hope and History*, Clinton wrote, "It was clear to me that if my vision of twenty-first century America was to become reality, we had to break out of yesterday's thinking and embark on a new and bold course for the future."<sup>117</sup> The "President's Initiative on Race," Kim concluded, tried to do just that. She argues that the initiative "bore an historical significance" that critics, journalists, and pundits overlooked: "the race initiative dramatically redefined the American race problem at the century's end."<sup>118</sup> Clinton's recognition of the "multicultural, multiracial character" of American society, she

suggests, set a new standard that future initiatives may follow.<sup>119</sup> Although Kim acknowledges that Clinton's approach may not have produced concrete solutions to the nation's race problems (and she suggests that was not Clinton's goal in any case), she concludes that Clinton was successful in "effecting a semantic closing of the racial breach."<sup>120</sup> In her final assessment of the "President's Initiative on Race," she concludes: "Highlighting the discrepancy between the nation's practices and its creed has not solved the race problem but it has done much to advance the cause of racial justice and equality throughout U.S. history."<sup>121</sup> Consistent with Pauley's view that presidential discourse can change perceptions about race, Kim recognized the race initiative's acknowledgement of racial differences as prompting larger contributions to the ongoing civil rights debates in America.

President Clinton's "Racism in the United States," along with his race initiative, reflected a new approach to civil rights. During his eight years in the White House, Clinton laid the foundation for the "diverse, democratic community" that the race initiative was designed to promote. His cabinet and judicial appointments, Virginia Shapiro and David T. Canon contend, "achieved the greatest gender and racial balance of any in U.S. history."<sup>122</sup> He also spoke out publicly about America's race problem, Wickham observes, "with a candor and insight that far surpasses that of any of the forty-one men who preceded him into the Oval Office."<sup>123</sup> Although many of his critics viewed Clinton's efforts as "merely" symbolic, an overwhelming number of blacks concluded that Clinton's compassion and interest were genuine. Tom Joyner, a black syndicated radio talk show host, for example, found much to praise in Clinton's efforts:

Bill Clinton had, and still has, a way of making people believe they are important—that they matter and that he has genuine concern for their well being. For a group of people like African Americans who have been treated, at best, like second-class citizens and afterthoughts by most politicians, he was a welcomed change.<sup>124</sup>

Bill Campbell, former mayor of Atlanta, Georgia added: "Clinton had a true commitment to diversity that was not seen in the presidency of the United States before his election—and black folks understand that."<sup>125</sup> Indeed, for many blacks, Clinton's words and deeds reflected his compassion and his sincere desire to create a unified America that recognized and celebrated racial differences. Although President Clinton's "Racism in the United States" and his race initiative may not have produced the dramatic results some had hoped for, Clinton's redefinition of the race problem in America marked an important step in the ongoing debate over civil rights in America and revealed the President's ability to help turn that debate in more positive and hopeful directions.

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