

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

Signature Page	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Contents	iii
Abstract	iv
First Page of Body	1
Conclusion	63
Bibliography	66

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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 sources such as speeches, press releases, and interdepartmental correspondence from the Clinton Presidential Library and other media

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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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 other minorities, explaining to the audience that “honest dialogue will not be easy at first.” Baker was quick to pounce on Clinton’s words, writing, “The mystery [about the Advisory Board] is why the President thinks we lack a dialogue on race. A roaring dialogue on race has been going on here for 350 years.”<sup>1</sup> Despite Baker’s incendiary remarks, Clinton’s Initiative and its Board were the first of their kind for nearly six decades. Similarly, Baker was ignoring that fact that Clinton was the first president in over thirty years to really place the power of the executive office behind a discussion of race in America.

Despite the relative media frenzy in which President Clinton’s Advisory Board was received, little has been done to uncover even general information about the Initiative, the Board, its members, or its mission. Yet the Board and its umbrella organization present a unique research opportunity in coming to understand not only presidential politics on race but also larger themes of race relations in general. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for this lack of interest lays heavily on the fact the Board was created fewer than fifteen years ago. More likely, however, the Board has been largely overlooked simply because, for so many, it was doomed from its inception and has been forgotten by even Clinton’s staunchest defenders.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Baker, “We’ve Got to Talk,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 1997.



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.

placed Clinton in a unique position as the president who could lead America into a new millennium.

Despite any noble or political intentions behind creating the Board, it was nonetheless never equipped to succeed. The members were overwhelmed with responsibilities and were unable to carry out what the American public and political pundits hoped they would be able to do. What this paper offers is a glimpse into the state of race relations and conceptions of solutions in the (very) late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which has become particularly salient with the changing landscape of race politics with election of the first African American president. Furthermore, this discussion of President Clinton's Advisory Board on Race demonstrates the limits of executive authority and the federal government in confronting and dealing with social justice, particularly when the subject is race and race relations.

## 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, this victory was preceded by the Truman administration. His administration was the first to take an active role in pursuing race policy in the modern era. In 1948, after his first election, President Truman began a series of actions to help alleviate racism as well as to resituate the institutionalized position on racism. He issued numerous executive orders and was the first president to send Congress "comprehensive civil rights legislation since Reconstruction."<sup>5</sup> Most significantly, President Truman created the President's Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR), the first of its kind. The Committee was created on December 5, 1946, and was charged with investigating the state of race relations in America. Truman's compulsion to create the PCCR derived from the state of race relations in post-WWII America. Returning African American soldiers received little

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Shull, *American Civil Rights Policy from Truman to Clinton*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Shull, *American Civil Rights Policy from Truman to Clinton*, 36.

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.

Truman’s decision to create his Committee was certainly not entirely out of a place of personal commitment to African American citizens. According to biographer

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<sup>6</sup> *To Secure These Rights: The Report of President Harry S Truman’s Committee on Race*, edited by Stephen F. Lawson (Boston, MA: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 2004), 22.

<sup>7</sup> *To Secure These Rights*, 27-28.

David McCullough, the President never “entirely [outgrew] his background,” and his language was often steeped in antiquated racial epithets.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, his impetus to improve the quality of life for minorities in America came out of his convictions and commitment to his interpretation of freedom and liberty. Those convictions and commitments, however, were deeply shaped by “a growing Soviet menace” that was viewed as a threat to liberty and democracy.<sup>9</sup> The onset of the Cold War brought Truman to a difficult crossroads. While he faced approval ratings below fifty-percent and a growing Communist threat, Truman ultimately decided to act in what he understood to be in the best interest of all Americans and disregarded the potential of his ratings dropping even lower.

Therefore, Truman took a great risk when he created the PCCR. For the former President, it was as simple as his emphatic statement, “We have got to do something!”<sup>10</sup> His aides testified to his growing concern, citing the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the Batesburg, North Carolina’s police chief’s violent attack on Sergeant Isaac Woodard, which left him blinded just “hours after his discharge from the Army.”<sup>11</sup> Truman combined his fervor with political caution, however, carefully instructing his Committee to “make recommendations with respect to adoption or establishment by legislation or otherwise of more adequate means and procedures for protection of civil right of the people of the United States.”<sup>12</sup> Less than a year later, Truman was provided with a copy of the Committee’s famous report, which hailed the federal government as the chief

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<sup>8</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Schuster, 1992), 588.

<sup>9</sup> Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>10</sup> *To Secure These Rights*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *To Secure These Rights*, 14.

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 elimination of racial discrimination in federal government employment.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite its presidential backing, the PCCR was limited by its political context. Certainly, Truman was rendered incapable of enforcing every proposal that was recommended. Nonetheless, this distinct political committee was an aberration for the time and set a precedent for the role of the President in race politics. No longer confined to the limitations of Congressional action, the office of the President came to assume a new role in shaping civil rights policy and expanded its duties in the effort to maintain guarantees of liberty and equality.

However, in the years immediately following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Eisenhower administration did little in the way of civil rights in comparison to Truman’s aggressive reputation. Stephen Shull terms his attitude “benign neutrality,” though one must wonder how harmless indifference really is in light of the state of civil rights during his term.<sup>15</sup> Eisenhower created the Civil Rights Commission, now known as the United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR), which researches the condition of civil rights in various public and private arenas such as schools and places of work.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, p. 587 from a speech delivered to Congress on February 2, 1948.

<sup>14</sup> *To Secure These Rights*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Shull, *American Civil Rights Policy from Truman to Clinton*, 36.

<sup>16</sup> The USCCR still continues its work today. For more information, visit <http://www.usccr.gov/>

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., *The Civil Rights Act of 1964: The Passage of the Law That Ended Racial Segregation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 25.



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 Movement, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Shull, *American Civil Rights Policy from Truman to Clinton*, 37.

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.

Eisenhower's and Truman's presidencies set relatively high standards for action in regards to race, particularly given the time period in which they held office. President Johnson also faced the less than desirable situation of following John F. Kennedy.

Though Johnson was unlikely to admit it, Kennedy's popularity had only increased after his assassination and as Johnson decided how to secure his legacy in the shadows of his predecessor, race probably seemed the best option. He also faced the disappointment he shared with Kennedy about the failure of the "New Frontier" Kennedy had promised. While Kennedy's victory appeared to be a turning point in American politics, his short time in office was marked with an infatuation with foreign affairs.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike Presidents assuming office for the first time, Johnson had the opportunity to observe and learn from Kennedy as he attempted to defend, protect, and uphold America in the Cold War. In this way, he had an advantage. He was able to quickly situate himself against the Soviet Union and turn more attention towards internal affairs. Johnson was also acutely aware that America had to maintain a positive image in the midst of the ideological struggle between the US and the USSR. Part of that maintenance was ensuring that America could not be considered hypocritical in its treatment of African Americans and other minorities. Though Johnson is often hailed as a champion of civil rights, his motivations were deeply affected by the international politics of the period. This is not to undercut Johnson's personal convictions but rather to highlight the ways in which external affairs shape internal policy. As Mary Dudziak explains, "Amid widespread support for American civil rights progress, in the Soviet Union criticism of

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<sup>21</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995), 62.

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 was not among his priorities or interests.

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<sup>22</sup> Mary L. Dudziak *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 210.

<sup>23</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to Congress: The American Promise,” delivered on March 15, 1965. For a full transcript, see <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650315.asp> (emphasis mine).

<sup>24</sup> Hugh Davis Graham, “The Civil Rights Commission: The First 40 Years,” *Civil Rights Journal* Vol. 2, no. 1 (1997), 6.

His affability came in part from his politics as a Republican and the inherent view that the government should play as little a role as possible in citizens' every day lives. President Ford's approach to Civil Rights was entirely detached. During his presidency, he passed no executive orders that had to do with civil rights – though Nixon had passed two. The Nixon-Ford years were marked by general government disinterest in getting involved in the civil rights, serving as the antithesis to the work accomplished by previous administrations. Even Jimmy Carter's presidency was not particularly remarkable in terms of civil rights achievements, despite being a Democrat. However, Carter was dedicated to the American public in other ways. His administration is responsible for the creation of the Department of Education and the strengthening of Social Security, for example. This era of relative mediocrity in terms of the executive office's role in improving race relations was quickly overturned by an era of redefinition.

The 1980s were, at best, a stagnant time for civil rights – at least in terms of the president. Ronald Reagan, for example, received fewer votes from the Black community than any president since the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Reagan sought to relocate the nexus of power for the acquirement and maintenance of civil rights away from the federal government, and this rearrangement of power is his greatest legacy in terms of civil rights. At the very least, Reagan's attention to civil rights also brought it to the attention of the American public. George Bush's approach to race relations and the role of the executive office, however, is more difficult to discern. Largely, this is due to the administration's change of focus as various events across the globe, most notably in the Middle East, began to unfold. It should be noted, however, that the Americans With Disabilities Act was passed under his administration in 1990. In short, the 1980s saw a

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 Presidential Advisory Board on Race, as well as other manifestations of his dedication to civil rights. Arguably, Bill Clinton “did more than any other president to keep black issues on the radar scope,” and this legacy transferred to other minority groups as well.<sup>26</sup> Although he kept himself and the nation apprised of issues facing Black Americans, this did not ultimately translate into success when he acted for their or other minorities’ benefit.

Investigating the President’s Advisory Board on Race brings up many of these questions. It also raises issues with the President’s ability to affect change. Clinton clearly modeled his Advisory Board off Truman’s Commission, hoping to see success in Congress. Certainly, he also looked to the commendations Johnson received upon passing the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Act. Yet, Clinton’s Board came at a time when there was no tangible issue to be addressed. Certainly, race relations deserved and continue to deserve attention; Clinton, however, lacked a key issue on which to attach such as lynching or segregation. The more covert and diffused character of racism and race relations in America eluded the President’s and the Board’s grasp. This contrast begins to illuminate the ultimate obstacle the Board would face as it tried to negotiate the limits of executive and federal power in addressing race relations.

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<sup>26</sup> Dewayne Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America* (New York, Random House, 2002), 237.

## 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 cannot create it. It can only come from the human spirit.” He invoked a sense of responsibility in his listeners by emphasizing the “human spirit” necessary to create and sustain racial equity. He explained that America had reached a “truly golden moment,” having ended the Cold War and maintaining the strongest economy America had seen in a generation, which was only bolstered by exciting new technological advances.<sup>27</sup> However, he also explained “there [were] still challenges out there,” some bigger than others. Among them, he listed disease and poverty, gang violence, and the pending retirement of the Baby Boomers. President Clinton made it clear which issue he felt was most important to address:

I believe that the greatest challenge we face...is also our greatest opportunity. Of all the questions of discrimination and prejudice that still exist in our society, the most perplexing one is the oldest, and in some ways today, the newest: the problem of race. Can we fulfill the promise of America by embracing all our children...? In short, can we become one America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?<sup>28</sup>

In this speech, the President clearly laid out just why a project on race equality was desperately needed. He demonstrated the connection between a unified America and one

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<sup>27</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks at the University of California San Diego Commencement Ceremony in La Jolla, California,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=54268&st=&st1=>

<sup>28</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=>

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. With that opportunity came a focus on the social – rather than political - aspects of policy, including the creation of the "One America" Initiative and his own Truman-esque Advisory Board.

However, Clinton's intentions in creating the Advisory Board cannot, of course, be determined without his own input. He does not include any insight in *My Life*, nor are there any clues among the documents archived with the National Archives and Records Administration. This is perhaps the greatest omission from the Board's short history, particularly in light of Clinton's reputation among minority and oppressed groups. In the October 1998 issue of *The New Yorker*, renowned author Toni Morrison claimed that "white skin notwithstanding, [Bill Clinton] is our first black President." She likened his childhood to the "trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class,

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<sup>31</sup> Dewayne Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America*, New York: Random House, 2002, 236.

<sup>32</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.

saxophone-playing, McDonald's and junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.”<sup>33</sup> She emphasized that though other Presidents were known as the champions of civil rights, something about Clinton was different. She suggested that unlike Abraham Lincoln, whose Emancipation Proclamation actually freed very few slaves, or Lyndon Johnson, who signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law more for reasons of international politics and the preservation of his administration's legacy than any personal conviction, Bill Clinton understood what it was like to be marginalized.<sup>34</sup> The mixed responses Morrison received are beyond the point; her message is one that many have relayed and supported.

Morrison's suggestion that Clinton was indeed closely connected to the black community or experience is evident in the amount of critical responses to his presidency. For example, in *Bill Clinton and Black America*, Dewayne Wickham, a journalist for *USA Today*, collected short essays about how the former President created, fostered, and maintained such a tight relationship with the black community. One contributor suggested “the real thing is that the boy blew the saxophone.”<sup>35</sup> Others suggested that it was more subtle things: his ability to understand and “study human nature,” he was an “underdog,” and that he was simply “human.”<sup>36</sup> Whatever it was, Clinton found some of his most loyal constituents in the black community, as well as in other minority communities. Wickham explains that although he does not see Clinton “as the first black

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<sup>33</sup> Toni Morrison, “Clinton as the First Black President,” *The New Yorker*, October, 1998.

<sup>34</sup> For more information about Lyndon B. Johnson's motivations to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Lowery in *Bill Clinton and Black America* by Dewayne Wickham, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Gwen McKinney in *Bill Clinton and Black America* by Dewayne Wickham, 27; Norma Johnson in *Bill Clinton and Black America* by Dewayne Wickham, 34.

president...he was the next best thing.<sup>37</sup> For example, Clinton appointed six African-Americans to cabinet positions and appointed “more black judges than Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush combined.”<sup>38</sup> Not only did he make appointments, his administration saw “black unemployment [fall] sharply, black homeownership and the number of black-owned businesses [rise] to record levels.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, Clinton had already secured his legacy as a champion of the African-American community as well as other minority groups well before he created the Advisory Board on Race. Though Bill Clinton was certainly not the “first black president” as Toni Morrison suggested, his connection to the African American community, as well as other minorities, was a very real one.

However, he received much criticism for only giving the project a one-year tenure. If the Initiative’s and Board’s goal centered around “dialogue, study, and action,” many people felt that twelve months would not be nearly enough time. After all, race was often perceived as a centuries old conversation topic. And by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, race wasn’t just about being black or white; other ethnicities and cultures also had to be considered. Clinton, however, had a strong history of supporting minority rights. He supported affirmative action as a remedy to racial inequity, though he was intent on its revision and coming to a new understanding about what it truly meant.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America*, 239.

<sup>38</sup> Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America*, 235.

<sup>39</sup> Wickham, *Bill Clinton and Black America*, 237.

<sup>40</sup> For more information about President Clinton’s approach to affirmative action, see Geroge E. Curry *The Affirmative Action Debate* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1996), Barbara Bergmann, *In Defense of Affirmative Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), and/ or Terry H. Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness: In Defense of Affirmative Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

### **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.” During its yearlong tenure, the Board compiled tens of thousands of documents pertaining to its members’ work. Though often sporadic and even sometimes vague, the large collections of speeches, memos, and emails portray the committed yet troubled legacy of Clinton’s Advisory Board. The year-long effort to understand, converse about, and propose ideas in order to improve race relations in the United States was seemingly commendable. However, the Board, and the “One America” initiative in its entirety, was flawed from its very inception.

From the beginning, its short, one-year tenure, kept the Board from actualizing its goal and becoming a solid landmark on the path towards racial reconciliation. The Initiative’s and Board’s short predetermined term was even more confusing considering strong position that the country enjoyed both within its borders and internationally. Indeed, the 42<sup>nd</sup> President’s first term is marked by great internal and external progression. For example, President Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in December of 1993, which lowered tariffs and eased other trade restrictions on the US, Canada, and Mexico. He also signed a welfare reform bill in August 1996, which gave more control to the states in hopes to improve the system. Many other accomplishments pepper the years leading up to the Presidential Initiative on Race, and by September of 1998, the budget was at a surplus for the first time in thirty years. This sense of stabilization and security supposedly urged the President to address

“the issue of race relation as [America prepared] for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”<sup>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. John Hope Franklin, a distinguished professor of History at Duke University and past president of Phi Beta Kappa, served as Chair of the Advisory Board. In 1995, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The six other members included: Linda Chavez-Thompson, a second generation Mexican-American, is an Executive Vice President of the AFL-CIO and a vice chair of the

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<sup>42</sup> It is difficult to discern the subgroups of the Initiative based on the archival sources at the Clinton Library. For example, Judith Winston was the Director of the Initiative but spoke frequently on behalf of the Advisory Board and was interviewed on the topic frequently. For the sake of this paper, it is easiest to understand this “differentiation” as simply rhetorical. After all, these members shared not only an office but also television and radio time, as well maintaining a relatively monolithic agenda despite bureaucratic grouping.

<sup>43</sup> 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).

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 diversity. Though he would receive criticism for the exclusion of conservatives from the Board, he stated consistently that he never intended to exclude Republicans from the conversation.<sup>44</sup> In fact, one set of talking points emphasized that the Board was “committed to reaching and including all people of good will, whatever their beliefs, who are interested in dealing with this difficult problem.”<sup>45</sup> For Clinton, selecting members who shared core political beliefs would hopefully steer the Board away from internal semantic conflicts; his intention was not to exclude conservatives but rather protect the Board from such distractions.

President Clinton and the Board also received criticism for the lack of diversity in age groups. John T. McCann of Raleigh, North Carolina wrote in to the Board lauding the President’s effort while simultaneously expressing his concern. He wrote, “While the panel is a good one, it’s also an old one.” He offered a strong argument for his opinion by explaining, “the decisions and opinion [the Board] puts forth will be implemented by those in my generation. We’ll have to live with the repercussions.”<sup>46</sup> McCann’s concern was a real one, but the Board attempted to quell his concerns in a letter that read, “We assure that the President has made excellent choices.”<sup>47</sup> Though they did not address McCann’s concern that his generation would be left with the supposedly ensuing changes, the Board did attempt to hear the voices of younger generations, engaging

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<sup>44</sup> Of course, Thomas Kean was and is a member of the Republican party. Pundits, however, criticized Clinton for including only one conservative out of seven as it did not accurately reflect the political makeup of America.

<sup>45</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>46</sup> Letter from John T. McCann, July 8, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Claire E. Gonzales to John T. McCann, October 18, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.



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 Board and the Initiative as whole. He told members of the audience “it is a good deal that there are so many of us who are different from each other...but [we must] celebrate our differences, [because] the most important thing is I’m an American.” He expounded on this notion, urging each citizen to “to join hands with all of our children to walk into this era, with excellence in education, with real economic opportunity, with an unshakable commitment to one America that leaves no one behind.”<sup>48</sup> He preached a message of not just tolerance, but acceptance and even “celebration.” He emphasized an “excellence in education” as the foundation for equality – both the system itself and what that system teaches its students. In order to articulate the objectives of the Board, which included an emphasis on education, the Board issued a memorandum that articulated its five major goals. They were:

- 1) to articulate the President’s vision of a just, unified America
- 2) to educate the nation about the facts of race in this country
- 3) to promote constructive dialogue to work through the issues of race

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<sup>48</sup> President William Clinton, “Remarks at the NAACP Convention,” July 17, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

- 4) to encourage leadership at the federal, state, local, community, and individual levels to bridge racial divides and
- 5) to identify and develop solutions in critical areas such as education, economic opportunity, housing, crime, and health care.<sup>49</sup>

These goals were fairly broad and encumbering and they seemed too extensive for an organization that was chartered for only one year. Clinton suggested that in order to carry out these five goals, the Board would have “to do certain things that are government policy, but...also know that this is an affair of the mind and heart, as well.”<sup>50</sup> These five goals then, would center around two loci: one governmental, the other personal.

However, this double purpose only compounded worries that the Board would be unable to actuate its goals. Even if policy was changed, there was no guarantee that the “minds and hearts” of the American people would follow in stride. Though his speech was intended to quell worries about the abilities of the Board, it ultimately suggested that the members were facing a challenge even the best intentions could not conquer.

The goals of the President and his Advisory Board were even more problematic when paired with the three strategies that were employed to actualize the goals: “constructive dialogue, study, and action.”<sup>51</sup> The only one of these that invoked a sense of community participation and involvement was “constructive dialogue,” but even it would not be supported by any real ability to effect change. After all, the “action” strategy referred only to recommendations and information that the Board would give to lawmakers. The Board itself could not create policy. It seems that the members

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<sup>49</sup> “President’s Initiative on Race: Background and Points of Progress,” found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

<sup>50</sup> President William Clinton, “Remarks at the NAACP Convention,” July 17, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

<sup>51</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.

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 throughout the United States. It also became clear that college campuses would be a valuable resource in trying to study race relations and creating suggestions to unite the country.

While the Initiative had its own physical space in Washington, D.C., the major meetings of the Advisory Board took place in cities across America, namely Akron, Denver, and Phoenix. Other meetings targeted at specific demographic groups – such as

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<sup>52</sup> “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: President’s Initiative on Race, Background and Points of Progress,” October, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 54, folder 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> For example, on June 14, 1997, the seven members of the Board joined together at a Press Conference in San Diego, California before President Clinton made his formal announcement about the Initiative and Board. For a transcript, visit The American Presidency website, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=48648&st=&st1=>

business and religious leaders – took place in cities like St. Louis and San Jose.<sup>55</sup> The Board also hosted fifteen televised “Town Hall” meetings throughout the country.<sup>56</sup> By hosting not only Advisory Board meetings but also public meetings in cities across America, the Board disseminated their message, which was surrounded by this “rhetoric of action,” to many different groups and regions. What is more, such varieties of location also allowed the members to receive and record feedback from people of many different races, ages, and classes. By televising some of these meetings, the Board reached an even vaster audience. Although the Board did not receive immediate feedback, viewers were likely candidates for correspondence with the Board. In this sense, the Board demonstrated its understanding of the importance reaching out to out to the entire nation – in both the personal and geographic sense. Ironically, there is a striking absence of attention paid to cities of the Deep South, perhaps one of the earliest indicators that the Advisory Board was limited by the bureaucratic nature of political action within the government itself.<sup>57</sup> By overlooking cities where the state of race relations has reached its most visible and infamous consequences, the Board not only disregarded a region steeped in the politics of race but the place where their presence was arguably needed the most. Though cities in the South certainly confront racial politics and relations, the tensions, manifestations, and solutions evident there brought political baggage the Board and the President may have not been willing to face. That is, Clinton understood that his initiative for “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” would be received with greater reluctance and

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<sup>55</sup> For more information, see the Clinton Library’s new One America website: <http://clinton2.nara.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica/events.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Colin Campbell and Bert Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy*, New York: Chatham House, 2004, 194.

<sup>57</sup> The Advisory Board met in Louisville, KY and New Orleans, LA, and Washington, DC. One must wonder why there were no meetings in cities like Savannah, GA or Raleigh, NC.

would offer an opportunity for Southern conservatives to thwart his efforts inside and outside of Congress.

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

By suggesting and encouraging strong ties between the Board members and the American community at large, the Advisory Board hoped to engage many who long felt they deserved a voice. The Board continually strived to maintain those ties, and did so not only through the aforementioned Town Hall meetings, but also through engaging college campuses. It was, in fact, at the University of California San Diego, where President Clinton first announced that the formation of the Presidential Initiative on Race, setting a precedent for his desire to engage college-aged adults in this new conversation.<sup>58</sup> Not only were campuses encouraged to participate, a week in April of 1998 was designated as the “Campus Week of Dialogue.”<sup>59</sup> The packet sent out to college officials throughout the nation explained the Initiative and the Board expected the “week [to] bring people together across racial lines, reach young leaders, and stimulate solutions to

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<sup>58</sup> To see a full transcript, visit The American Presidency Project website:  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=54268&st=&st1=>

<sup>59</sup> “Campus Week of Dialogue: Who Will Build One America?”, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 3.  
\*In fact, the entire month of April 1998 was designated as a “Month of Dialogue.”

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." This was the most tangible product the Board created and even its legacy has been lost, once again indicating how impotent the Board actually was.

### “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 one – a dialogue among its distinguished members. These two separate yet parallel conversations depended upon the creation and maintenance of a distinct rhetoric that would become the image of the Advisory Board on Race. Through this measured manner of conception, the Board and its members lost themselves in the details of that image and the consistent preparation needed for its preservation. They spent more energy making sure that the public received the image it was supposed to rather than finding solutions to the inherent problems in the Board’s bureaucratic arrangement.

Clinton’s idea of an “unprecedented conversation” also confused the American public. Many citizens wrote to the board wondering how a centuries-old conversation could become “unprecedented.”<sup>65</sup> Others were encouraged by the idea of a new kind of dialogue – one that is beneficial instead of belittling. The latter notion is the one the Board chose to put forth. At a press briefing on June 14, 1997, the same day Clinton announced the “One America” Initiative, Dr. Franklin defended this new kind of conversation. When asked how the Board would be “different from what’s been done in the past,” he replied, “a national conversation about race and ethnicity has not occurred in

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<sup>64</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>65</sup> Even Judith Winston admits to this type of confusion in “Talking points for Judith A. Winston: Public Policy and International Affairs National Conference, Academy for Educational Development,” October 21, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 3.



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 September 30, 1997. Franklin told Lehrer that his greatest hope for the Board was “to improve the climate and move forward toward racial reconciliation.”<sup>67</sup> It is clear that Dr. Franklin saw the importance of “constructive dialogue.” When asked if she felt that the Board was “off on the right track toward doing something that matters?,” Oh replied, “I really do...I think it is quite courageous for this administration to take on an issue such as this and to be supportive of an initiative that takes the American public on a journey that many people have not wanted to take.”<sup>68</sup> She made it clear that this “journey” would probably be met with resistance, noting that race is still a “matter of the heart,” once again heightening the obstacles the Board would face.<sup>69</sup> The interview on *The NewsHour* suggests that the Board was aware of the obstacles in its path, yet its members were not any less ambitious or determined to actualize their goals. Their greatest opponent would

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<sup>66</sup> “Press Briefing by Presidential Advisory Board on Race,” June 14, 1997, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=48648>.

<sup>67</sup> *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, September 30, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 55, folder 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

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 report. Furthermore, the programs would supposedly be brought to the President himself. The Board perpetuated a sense of humility by looking to American public at every possible juncture. Members continually engaged the public, reassuring them that they were the most valuable resource for their work, even if those assurances were false. This sense of partnership was the Advisory Board’s most valuable tool. Despite great participation and the sense of importance the meetings undoubtedly instilled in those participants, the Board relied on words, not action, to create and maintain a sense of public participation. The disparity between their rhetoric – a “rhetoric of action” - and their abilities to make tangible change would be the Board’s greatest failure.

The collection of speeches given by Judith A. Winston is one of the most valuable sources in understanding the rhetorical creation of the Advisory Board and the Initiative on Race as a whole. In general, the speeches that the members of the Board and the Initiative delivered are integral to piecing together exactly what the Board did and what it was working towards. Similarly, the speeches help underscore the manners in which the Board’s and Initiative’s images were dependent upon a “rhetoric of action.” Winston gave many of her speeches during the Board’s and Initiative’s early months, from September to November of 1997. These early speeches were given to interest groups, national and local organizations, members of Congress, as well as to college communities. Within them, some given on the same day, Winston continually lays out the

Board's mission(s) and their intention to create Clinton's so-called "unprecedented dialogue."

On September 11, 1997, Winston delivered a speech to the Congressional Black Caucus Issue Forum on "Race Dialogue." Within the speech, Winston explained President Clinton's personal connection to the struggle for racial equity. She told the Caucus that "[President Clinton], as so many of us, has witnessed first hand [racial discrimination's] deleterious effects and the harm which it has caused."<sup>70</sup> The rhetoric surrounding Clinton's vested interest in the Board's work, as well as the Presidential Initiative on Race as a whole, was another important point that members of the Board worked diligently to convey to the public. This, of course, was an important message to convey to the American public as well as their political representatives.<sup>71</sup> By expanding upon the President's *personal* desire to mend racial rifts, the Board members accentuated the close connection between themselves and the Oval Office. This message assured the public that recommendations made by the Board would not only be received by the President but also, and perhaps more importantly, treated with expediency and care.

The same day, Winston delivered another speech that assured the audience that this "unprecedented dialogue" was "personal" to the President; it also served as the epitome of the messages Board members would convey over the next twelve months in speeches, press releases, and interviews. Within the first few bullet points, Winston articulated the five broad goals of the Board and Initiative and three broad strategies

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<sup>70</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>71</sup> For example, Winston mentions this again in the following speech: "Remarks by Judith A. Winston: The American Institute on Managing Diversity, Inc.," September 18, 1997, , found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 5.

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)

enacting policy, the comment swiftly awakened concern among listeners and highlights the manners in which the Board's image was rendered impotent. Suddenly, the rhetoric of action that overflowed out of speeches, press releases, and various interviews became just that: words. The Initiative's and the Board's inability to actually effect any real change not only destabilized their images; it also emphasized its reliance upon action-based rhetoric to compensate for its impotence.

The Board and the Initiative as whole were, of course, involved in an active way. Winston attempted to explain that though "the President's Initiative is not a policy making body...[they were] committed to ACTION."<sup>77</sup> She followed up with active verbs such as "identify," "study," and "evaluate." Yet each of these actions requires some sense of self-removal or passive position. And though members would "recommend policies" there is an overwhelming sense of passivity despite the consistently used rhetoric of action.

Winston delivered another speech on September 18, 1997, at the American Institute for Managing Diversity, Inc. in Atlanta. Unlike previous document, this set of talking points has her handwritten notes in the margins. Over and over again, Winston wrote reminders to herself emphasize the point that "if only talking, no action → wouldn't be here."<sup>78</sup> This important message appears several times throughout the short, four-page speech and emphasizes how very important the message of action was to the Initiative and Board. And though she undoubtedly delivered a speech laden with this message, the fact remains that the "culmination" of their year of work would be "a

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> "Remarks by Judith A. Winston: The American Institute on Managing Diversity, Inc.," September 18, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 5.

report...of the state of race relations in America” and not a set of policy proposals.

Whether or not the report would be utilized to create new policy “tailored to respond to the needs of [this] diverse nation” could not have been predicted as the members began their yearlong tenure.<sup>79</sup>

What remains uncertain is how much the Board members understood the ambiguous position that they occupied. As an Advisory Board, it was clear that they would be serving as liaisons between the public and the President. However, that the Board members knew how limited their abilities would be is doubtful. As evidenced by Franklin’s response at the June 14<sup>th</sup> press briefing, the members seemed to believe they had the opportunity to enact real change. How long that impression lasted is indeterminable. It must have lasted long enough to ensure that the members stayed with the Board and were willing to devote their time to tackling race relations. For Linda Chavez-Thompson, the motivation for working with the Board was simple. “I’ve listened to the questions of whether this is going to make a difference,” she began. “The alternative is, what if we don’t talk about it? What if we don’t try to make something happen?”<sup>80</sup> At least for Chavez-Thompson, the consequences of not talking about race outweighed the pragmatic and logistical questions of trying. It is fair to say that the members of the Board saw what they were doing as a good faith effort, at the very least. While there is no evidence that provides a definitive answer about how much the Board members knew or what obstacles they foresaw, their continual dedication suggests that they hoped for the best and expected their final report to be received with anticipation.

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<sup>79</sup> “Remarks by Judith A. Winston: The American Institute on Managing Diversity, Inc.,” September 18, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, Box 53, Folder 5.

<sup>80</sup> “Press Briefing by Presidential Advisory Board on Race,” June 14, 1997, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=48648>.

Despite this seeming enthusiasm, it became clear that the Board would face many criticisms and drew the members' attention to the obstacles they would face internally and externally by early November. The President was scheduled to appear on *Meet the Press* to present his Board to a larger, diverse audience. In the days leading up to his appearance, members of the Board, as well as various officials on his staff, were asked to come up with "hard questions" that could be potentially posed to the President. Within the first two months of the Initiative and Board, it seemed that their respective members were aware of the organizations' downfalls, whether real or perceived. Some questions that were received, collected, and forwarded to the President's assistants included the following:

- It looks like the Initiative has fizzled. There's been little action or activity. How do you respond to that criticism?
- Will this result in another Kerner Commission type report that will gather dust on the shelf?
- Where is the Initiative headed? What seems to be the problem? Is this just another case of how the White House is incapable of developing and implementing a single plan?<sup>81</sup>

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

As the President's appearance on *Meet The Press* grew closer, a staff member prepared a briefing packet with what they saw as the most challenging questions that might be posed to President Clinton. Though such preparations are routine within the

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<sup>81</sup> Email sent from Michael Wegner to Claire Gonzales, November 6, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 53, folder 2.



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.

## Response to the Board

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

Media coverage was, for the most part, either negative or neutral. Just three days after Clinton shared his intentions to create such an Advisory Board, Russell Baker of *The New York Times* offered a searing criticism on June 17, 1997. He claimed "Mr. Clinton summons us only to a national gabfest," and wonders "why the President think we lack dialogue on race."<sup>84</sup> He proffered what many Americans were thinking: how can this be new considering how long the has country been talking about race? By October of the same year, it seemed that Americans, at least as represented by the media, were beginning to wonder if the Advisory Board was going to do anything at all. Steven A. Holmes, also of *The New York Times*, reported that President Clinton and Vice President Gore met with Board to urge them along in their efforts. "Missing," wrote Holmes, "...was any crispy talk about what the panel itself would do to foster better understanding among the nation's various racial and ethnic groups." Perhaps even more important is

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<sup>84</sup> Russell Baker, "We've Got to Talk," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1997

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.

<sup>86</sup> Felicia R. Lee, "The Nation; The Honest Dialogue that is Neither," *The New York Times*, December 7, 1997.

<sup>87</sup> Walter Goodman, "Where Image Prevails, Talk About Race Turns Bland," *The New York Times*, December 9, 2007

<sup>88</sup> US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Incident Based Statistics*, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ibrs.htm>.

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> Marvin Turner wrote, “racial dialogue is necessary but not sufficient.” He asked that the President

launch a more directed and targeted attack upon these public policies that limit economic opportunities, economic development and social mobility for a group of Americans who are African, Asian, Latina, and Native America.<sup>93</sup>

Mr. Turner saw the Advisory Board’s most fallible quality: it rested upon conversation, not action – despite the image it attempted to create.

Of course, there were those who found the Advisory Board’s greatest fallback to be its mere existence. Roy H. Wallis sent a postcard to President Clinton that simply stated: “This new commission of yours is only another way to increase government spending and an attempt to solicit the black vote.”<sup>94</sup> Another citizen wrote in that the government has “already give the blacks zillions of dollars in welfare money. So, the day you give them twenty-four trillion dollars will be the day will be the day we all vote Republican.”<sup>95</sup> Clearly, not all Americans were convinced by President Clinton’s attempt to resolve racially-based injustice.

Other members of the American community seemed to completely misunderstand the function of the Advisory Board all together. Many citizens wrote in complaining about mistreatment at work or in public facilities hoping that members of the Board would be able to assist them in their pursuit of justice. An African American man from Kentucky wrote in hoping for assistance in his court case against his former place of

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<sup>92</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>93</sup> Letter from Marvin Turner, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 1. (emphasis original)

<sup>94</sup> Postcard from Roy H. Wallis, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 10, folder 1.

<sup>95</sup> Letter to President Clinton on September 30, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 2. (emphasis original)

employment.<sup>96</sup> Elmer Jones sent records of discrimination he faced in his workplace, in the military, and in government offices.<sup>97</sup> Each complainant received a letter explaining that while the Advisory Board did not handle cases itself, it wished to eradicate the problems of which they were speaking. The misperception of not only the Advisory Board's agenda but also its resources speaks to one of the many challenges it faced – articulating its true mission(s).

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

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

This confusion manifested itself in many ways, but the best example of the public's misunderstanding of the Board, its goals, and its abilities came in the form of affirmative action. Clinton was well known for reversing the stance of his predecessor,

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<sup>96</sup> Letter from Benny J, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Elmer Jones, September 30, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.

George Bush, Sr, on affirmative action. His administration approached affirmative action with “Mend It, Don’t End It.” According to former president of the NAACP, Kweisi Mfume, Clinton’s approach to the affirmative action debate was both calculated and dynamic. Clinton “recognized that affirmative action programs have increased opportunities for Americans and built a stronger, more productive nation...[and] that diversity is our strength.” However, he simultaneously “[opposed] quotas, fraud, and abuse (as we all do) and [knew] that opponents [were] using ‘quotas’ as a buzzword despite the fact that quotas are illegal.”<sup>98</sup>

Clinton saw the ways in which affirmative action had both benefited and harmed the American people. When preparing for *Meet The Press*, one of his aides delineated the President’s hopes for the Board’s work in dealing with affirmative action, suggesting the President answer questions about the subject by emphasizing that “affirmative action is only a small part of this debate” and is only a distraction from the “real, underlying problems of race.”<sup>99</sup> Despite this, many proponents and critics of the Board focused on affirmative action in their responses to the work it was trying to do. Benny J. Smith wrote a letter to Judith Winston that detailed “a potentially explosive case” in which he was the plaintiff. He was suing his employer for ‘corporate lynching,’ and hoped that Board would be able to assist him.<sup>100</sup> He spoke of the ways in which, despite the best efforts of the administration, efforts to integrate the workplace, particularly at the corporate level, were failing. Though it is reasonable that the Board was unable to assist him with his

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<sup>98</sup> Kweisi Mfume, “Why America Need Set-Aside Programs,” in *The Affirmative Action Debate*, edited by George E. Curry (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1996), 126.

<sup>99</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>100</sup> Letter from Benny J. Smith, October 18, 1997, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 6, folder 1.



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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<sup>101</sup> Gary M. Pomerantz, "How John Hope Franklin handled the nation's race conversation," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 25, 2009.

## 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 Europeans began their conquest?"<sup>102</sup> Mr. Rauch's candid question was one asked over and over again. His letter, like so many others, went unanswered. Other correspondents were angrier and more confused about why "their people" were being excluded. Black Wolf wrote, "We are the first citizens of this country – not someone visiting." He asked, "Are we not an issue to you anymore, have we been chopped down so low in numbers that our [voices] and [cries] for help are no longer heard[?]"<sup>103</sup> Black Wolf relayed many Native Americans' feelings of abandonment and betrayal. They felt that they had been

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<sup>102</sup> Letter from Thomas M. Rauch, March 23, 1998, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 1.

<sup>103</sup> Online message sent from Wendel "Black Wolf" Kurz on July 12, 1998, found in the National Archives and Records Administration's Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 1.

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 indigenous people. Judith Winston, executive directory of the Presidential Initiative on Race replied that “[The Board] was not intended to represent the composition of the United States, we can’t have that with only seven people [on the Board].”<sup>105</sup> Winston’s comment served as evidence that the Board’s language, which emphasized “One America,” was a false promise. For many citizens, particularly Native Americans, “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” became “One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” except for those groups we do not have room to represent.

If the Board’s original exclusion of Native Americans and other indigenous people was not incriminating, Ms. Winston’s comment most certainly succeeded in alienating many Americans. After March 23<sup>rd</sup>, letters, emails, and online messages began to pour in, demanding that she recant her statement or that the President take executive action. The President, for the most part, had a strong record concerning Native American issues. Perhaps this confused citizens even more. He met with tribal leaders, proposed

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<sup>104</sup> Letter from Seledia Shephard, April 2, 1998, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 6.

<sup>105</sup> Online message sent from Carl Hudson on March 24, 1998, found in the National Archives and Records Administration’s Federal Policy Collection at the Clinton Presidential Center, box 9, folder 1.

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 reliance on Civil Rights 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 limitations or expectations placed upon them based on race. What is more, it is possible to conceive a change over time in the manners in which groups resisted and worked actively to secure their civil rights. Understanding that race is a social construction – not a biological one – ultimately shapes the way in which groups have to fight. It provides another angle through which groups can resist. Similarly, it provides an outlet through which to refute unjust treatment and subordination. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that the Advisory Board’s understanding of race, if not the President’s as well, shaped the agenda, notions, and philosophies behind its creation. Perhaps at their most basic level, theoretical paradigms regarding race focus on the “constructed” aspect of race; those things which are accepted as facts or “truisms” but are contingent upon presuppositions and

generalizations, or are simply false. As Farai Chideya states in her book *The Color of Our Future: Race for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, “everyday racial categories are not our own construction.”<sup>108</sup> And if they are not solely one’s own, they are acquired through mimicry and appropriation. As informed members of the Board, it is doubtful that they were unaware of these notions; therefore, the question becomes what the Board did with the information.

One of the Board’s main prerogatives was to open up a forum in which people could bring discussions that would hopefully offer the opportunity to get to “the heart” of these preconceived notions. What the Board did not account for, however, was the intense dependence the maintenance of race hierarchies, racism, and race itself on institutions.<sup>109</sup> In this way, the Board was inherently limited. As a government initiative the Board was immediately an agent of a larger institution. Perhaps these origins prevented the Board from being capable of divorcing itself from those implications. More importantly, though, the Advisory Board was not seeking to investigate and expose the institutions that create and uphold racial norms and prejudices. In short, the Board’s aims focused mainly on creating a public dialogue and extending itself to groups already working to break down racial barriers.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Farai Chideya, *The Color of Our Future: Race for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 11.

<sup>109</sup> Here, I invoke institutions in the sociological sense of the word. At the institutional level, there lies a sense of bureaucracy and hierarchy. An institution, therefore, can be something as intangible as society at large to a place of business. It is possible, therefore, to understand that institutions, whether substantial or not, play a large part in the proliferation of racial understandings.

<sup>110</sup> As a reminder, the five main goals of the PABR were as follows: 1) to articulate the President’s vision of a just, unified America, 2) to educate the nation about the facts of race in this country, 3) to promote constructive dialogue to work through the issues of race, 4) to encourage leadership at the federal, state, local, community, and individual levels to bridge racial divides, and 5) to identify and develop solutions in critical areas such as education, economic opportunity, housing, crime, and health care. This can be found in the following location: “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. See also footnote 40.

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 change in racial composition in the United

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<sup>111</sup> Chideya, *The Color of Our Future*, 35, emphasis mine.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</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. See also footnotes 40 and 111.



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] high profile,” other minorities, such as “Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans” become nearly invisible and “don’t register as often on the national radar.”<sup>114</sup> The strongest piece of evidence that the Board succumbed to this trend is that of leaving Native Americans off the Board.

What is most complicated, however, is not that the Board was unaware of this changing demographic. Rather, it is evident that they understood but were incapable of making their understanding clear to the public. What this demonstrates is that the Board, despite their intentions and personal understandings, was once again bound by its inability to act and the image they created.

Investigating race on a theoretical – and often simultaneously practical – level offers a new perspective in regard to the Board’s shortcomings. Ultimately, this investigation demonstrates that it was unprepared to handle the complicated nature of race itself and further, the manners in which race relations were carried out. Americans had become skeptical of simplistic definitions of race and inequality – which seemed prevalent in the Board’s discourse - by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ultimately, the Board’s failure to truly appreciate this shift limited its effectiveness.

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<sup>114</sup> Chideya, *The Color of Our Future*, 33.

## 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 nation. Dr. John Hope Franklin, chairman of the Board, wrote the opening letter, explaining that they "did not expect [their] task to be easy," but were pleased with the overwhelming support they received. This, Franklin wrote, demonstrates that "race still divides our country."<sup>116</sup> He continued, explaining that the document was "not a definitive analysis of the state of race relations," but rather, "an account of the Board's experiences and impressions."<sup>117</sup> Once again, the Board clearly admitted its fallibility: it could talk, it could observe, but it could not *act*.

The report also described the landmarks the Board claimed to reach during its tenure, including a National Conference on Hate Crimes in November of 1997, the identification of over three-hundred "Promising Practices" to serve as models for effective programs to improve race relations, and over 35 states' and almost 90 cities' involvement in the program. Most importantly, though, the report contained many recommendations in order to prepare the country for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The most highly

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<sup>115</sup> For a full copy of the report, visit the NARA website at [http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR\\_main.pdf](http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR_main.pdf)

<sup>116</sup> The President's Advisory Board on Race, *One America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Forging a New Future*, [http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR\\_main.pdf](http://clinton4.nara.gov/media/pdf/PIR_main.pdf).

<sup>117</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), 1-2.

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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<sup>119</sup> On page 813, Clinton writes in a list of things his staff was working amidst the Lewinsky scandal, "receiving the final report from the President's Advisory Commission on Race." Interesting, he refers to it as the "commission" and not the "Board," though this is most likely a matter of semantics.

<sup>120</sup> Colin Campbell and Bert Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy*, New York: Chatham House, 2004, 194.

people were enlightened; perhaps some felt that the notion of such a Board was admirable in and of itself. Most, though, were disenchanted by the Board's inability to actually *do* anything. Though an *advisory* Board, it surrounded itself in a rhetoric that made it seem more powerful – and more promising – than it actually was. Over time, this disconnection between rhetoric and ability became evident, ultimately disillusioning those who had vested an interest in its success. Similarly, this disparity contributed to the Board's Had President Clinton, for example, organized a Congressional committee to address the issue, citizens would have been reassured that their suggestions would wind up in the hands of someone capable of writing legislation and policy. In the end, the Advisory Board, though noble in intention, was nothing more than an empty attempt to remedy the epic issue of race relations.

## 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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