

Opening Remarks in a Townhall Meeting on Race in Akron, Ohio *December 3, 1997*

Thank you. Thank you very much. Dr. Ruebel, thank you. We're delighted to be here at the University of Akron. I want to thank my good friend Senator John Glenn and your Congressman, Tom Sawyer; Congressman Lou Stokes; Congressman Sherrod Brown for being here. And Mayor Don Plusquellic, thank you so much for making Akron so available and for doing all you have to help us. I thank the county executive, Tim Davis, and all the people here in Akron who have just been wonderful in helping us to put this together.

I also thank the people who are behind me who have agreed to be a part of our panel today and to kind of put themselves on the line on behalf of all the rest of you, and I hope on behalf of all Americans, in launching this important dialog.

There are 96 watch sites that have been set up around the country by our regional administrators, constituency groups, and others who will be kind of doing what we're doing here in their own way after they watch us.

I'd also like to acknowledge the presence here today of members of our racial advisory board: Dr. John Hope Franklin, our Chair; Linda Chavez-Thompson; Reverend Suzan Johnson Cook; and Judy Winston, our Executive Director.

Ladies and gentlemen, last June at the University of San Diego I challenged all Americans to join me for at least a year in addressing the enormous challenge of making one America out of all of our racial, ethnic diversity in this country. At the time I did it, a lot of people said, "Well, why is he doing this? We're not having any riots in the cities. The economy is the best it's been in a generation." And my answer was, that's precisely why I'm doing it now, because what I have tried to do as your President is to get all of us to think about and work on things that are going to be critical to our future before the wheel runs off, because if we plan together and work together to make the most of our common future, we can avoid some of the terrible things that have happened in other countries, and we can avoid repeating some of the darker chapters of our own history. And, by the way, we can acknowledge that we

still have some problems and we need to get them out on the table and deal with them.

Now, to me, this is a critical part of the larger challenge of preparing our country to live in the next century. It's not just a new century in a new millennium. There's a whole different world out there in the way we work and learn and live and relate to each other. All of you know that. And I have done my best to pursue a vision that would create opportunity for everybody responsible enough to work for it and to maintain our country's leadership in the global economy and for world peace and security and freedom, to give everybody a chance to be a part of the winner's circle in America. But I know it can't be done unless we recognize the fact that we are rapidly becoming the most diverse and integrated democracy in the world.

We have to deal with a lot of the older racial issues that have been with us from the beginning—from the time of Africans coming here on slave ships, between blacks and whites; from the time of our moving Indian tribes off the land, between Native Americans and white Americans; from the time of the war with Mexico, between Americans and Mexican-Americans—now increasingly enriched and diversified by all the immigrants that have come to America in the 20th century.

In the school district that's just across the river from my office in Washington, DC, there are now students from over 180 different national groups, with over 100 different native languages, in one school district. We are becoming a very richly multiracial, multiethnic society at a time when, in the last few years, we've read of ethnic and racial hatred and murders and problems and wars from Bosnia to the Middle East to Northern Ireland to Africa to Russia to India—you name it. And we're beating the odds so far, with all of our problems.

But I think it is very important that we understand that this is something that we have to keep dealing with honestly and openly. There are many people today with whom I have great sympathy, who say, "Well, the President shouldn't be talking about race out of context. Most of the problems that minorities have today

are problems of economic and educational opportunity that they share with people who aren't in their ethnic group, and what we really need is an affirmative opportunity agenda to create more jobs for all the dispossessed, create more educational opportunities for everybody that doesn't have them." I basically agree with that. I agree with that. But you have only to look at the rest of the world and your own experience to know that in addition to that, there is something unique about racial difference that affects the way people relate to each other in every society in the world.

It can be wonderful. It can be truly wonderful. We ought not—I don't like it when people say we ought to tolerate our differences; I don't buy that. I think we ought to respect and celebrate our differences. Tolerance is the wrong word here. But we also ought to struggle constantly to identify what unites us; that's more important than what's different about us. And that's why we're having these townhall meetings.

Now let me say, I want to now turn to the people who are here. And I want to ask all of you who won't be talking to carry on this conversation in your mind—and all of those at the other sites around the country. And when this is over, I want you to go out and do this all over again at work or in any other groups that you're in, because what we're trying to do here is drop a pebble in the pond and have it reverberate all across America, because I honestly believe that this is a good country full of good people. There's never been a challenge we've ever faced we haven't been able to overcome. And so I ask all of you to join me and to help us in that.

I also would remind you that if we don't speak frankly about what we believe, then when it's over, we won't feel very good. I told our opening speakers, I said, "You've got to imagine that we're at a cafe downtown, sitting around a table drinking coffee together. Forget about the fact that all these people are staring at you and you're on television." [Laughter] "Don't say this in the way you think it's most proper. Say this—whatever you have to say—in the way you think is most honest so that we can move forward together." Again, let me say that this dialog to me is an important part of where we're going.

Now, we have responsibilities in Washington, too. There is an economic responsibility. There is an education responsibility. A few weeks ago I announced that we were going to support

scholarships for people who would go out and teach in educationally deprived areas where we needed more teachers. Today we are releasing a proposal to create educational opportunity zones to reward school districts in poor urban and rural areas who undertake the kind of sweeping reform that Chicago has embraced in the last couple of years, closing down failing schools, promoting public school choice, holding students and teachers accountable, involving parents more, providing opportunities for students who have learning problems to learn but ending automatic social promotion and giving people high school diplomas that don't mean anything.

I think that we should support that sort of thing, and we will do that. We have a policy responsibility. I think we should build on our economic efforts to create an affirmative economic opportunity agenda that crosses racial lines, and the same thing with education, the same thing with health care, the same thing with things like our family and medical leave law that helped people balance the demands of work and family. Yes, there is a public responsibility here. But this country, in the end, rises or falls on the day-to-day activities of its ordinary citizens.

Again, let me say that I thank the racial advisory board for the work they have done here. I said I thought three of them were here, but I see Governor Winter is also here. We have four of the five members who are here today, and I received a letter from Angela Oh, the member who could not be here today—is she here? Oh, hello, how are you? I was told you weren't coming. That makes our board more diverse; that's good.

So we're going to do our part, but I don't want anybody for a moment minimizing the importance of this sort of dialog. The reason we came to Akron, as was said earlier, in part is because of this Coming Together Project you've done here. And I believe if we can find constructive ways for people to work together, learn together, talk together, be together, that's the best shot we've got to avoid some of the horrible problems we see in the rest of the world, to avoid some of the difficult problems we've had in our own history, and to make progress on the problems that we still have here today.

Now, I think it's appropriate that we begin this dialog with young people. After all, they've got more time in front of them than behind them. And it is their lives that will be most

directly affected by this incredible explosion of diversity while we become more integrated into a world of global diversity than the rest of us.

So let's begin. Our first student here is McHughson Chambers. And he has an interesting ethnic background himself. I'd like to ask him basically to begin by trying to level with us about what impact, if any, race has on his life and whether he believes it affects any of his relationships with other people and his future prospects in life.

McHughson.

NOTE: The President spoke at noon in the E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall at the University of Akron. In his remarks, he referred to Dr. Marion Ruebel, president, University of Akron; Summit County Executive Tim Davis; and former Governor of Mississippi William F. Winter, member, President's Advisory Board on Race. The discussion was part of "One America: The President's Initiative on Race."

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[University of Akron student McHughson Chambers stated that he was biracial and described his encounters with discrimination.]

The President. Our second student, Jonathan Morgan. Jonathan, what do you think about what he said? Do you think there is still discrimination here at this school or in this community or in the country? And do you think that most people want to live in an integrated society?

[Mr. Morgan responded that there were still a lot of prejudiced people, particularly in the older generations.]

The President. Maybe we need a panel on ageism instead of racism. [Laughter]

Mr. Morgan. I apologize. [Laughter]

The President. That makes it worse. Don't do that. [Laughter]

[Mr. Morgan said he believed that his own generation had worked out their prejudices.]

The President. Do you think it's because of personal experiences, do you think it's because you've had more direct personal experience with people from different age groups? Or do you think it's because you grew up in a different time where the climate, the legal and the political and the social climate, was different?

Mr. Morgan. I think it was because I grew up in a different time. We grew up watching television. "The Cosby Show" was my favorite show. [Laughter]

The President. So, therefore, if you worked at a bank and a black person came in with

a check you wouldn't necessarily think it ought to be held because you saw Bill Cosby, and he was a good role model? [Laughter] No, this is important. No, no, this is important.

Mr. Morgan. Yes, I don't think I would give him a hard time. But at the same time, I have my own prejudices, whereas if I'm walking downtown on a street and I see a black man walking towards me that's not dressed as well, I might be a little bit scared. So, I mean, at the same time I have those prejudices.

The President. Do you think that's because of television crime shows, or because of your personal experience?

Mr. Morgan. It would have nothing to do with my personal experience. Just from the media, television shows, and things that I have heard.

The President. Christina Ibarra, what do you think about that? Do you believe that attitudes are better among young people? Do you think that there is still discrimination today? Is it worse for African-Americans than it is for other minority groups; is it different? What do you think?

[Student Christina Ibarra agreed that older people were more prejudiced but said that young people raised in prejudiced environments changed after they interacted with a more diverse group of people at the university.]

The President. So do you believe—let me ask you this—do you believe that having an integrated educational environment is the primary reason that young people have better attitudes, more open attitudes than older people—because