

Remarks in a Meeting With the President's Advisory Board on Race September 18, 1998

[Chairman John Hope Franklin described some of his experiences during his 15 months on the Board, saying that the most gratifying thing was the response of the American people to the President's Initiative on Race. Board member William F. Winter, former Governor of Mississippi, noted that the Board's report recommended that the President establish a council to carry forward the initiative in a permanent way. He then gave the President a poster-size photograph of an Oxford, MS, elementary school class which the Board had visited.]

The President. What a wonderful poster!

[Governor Winter read a student's letter to the President and then presented the President with a book of letters from the entire class.]

The President. Isn't that great? Maybe I ought to read that to people.

Governor Winter. And they want you to come visit their class. [Laughter]

The President. This is your grandson's class?

Governor Winter. That's my grandson's class. That's right.

Chairman Franklin. We went to the classroom.

Governor Winter. We had a great day down there.

Chairman Franklin. We did, indeed.

Board Member Linda Chavez-Thompson. And I have to follow that? [Laughter] I didn't bring a book.

The President. This is beautiful, too. Nice.

[Ms. Chavez-Thompson and Board members Thomas H. Kean and Angela E. Oh each made brief remarks thanking the President for the opportunity to serve on the Board, recounting their experiences, and urging the President to continue his efforts for educational and economic opportunity and racial reconciliation.]

Chairman Franklin. There's one thing Angela didn't do; she didn't tell you that she's going to write a book saying, "How Being a Member of the Advisory Board Changed My Life." [Laughter]

The President. It's here on the tape, the first chapter. [Laughter]

[Board member Robert Thomas praised the contributions of President's Race Initiative Executive Director Judith A. Winston and Board consultants Christopher Edley and Laura Harris. Emphasizing the importance of education, he joked that without "something big, huge, tremendous, way beyond the norm, we'll just be perfuming the pig."]

The President. We had a long discussion about where that came from. [Laughter] I thought I never heard it before you said it, but I like it. I'm going to use it shamelessly. [Laughter]

[After Mr. Thomas concluded his remarks, Board member Suzan D. Johnson Cook, thanked the President for opening the door to a conversation on race. She then asked him to autograph a picture for her son and presented him with a book entitled "Too Blessed To Be Stressed."]

The President I accept that. That's great.

Ms. Cook. And so we're praying for you, and we thank you so much for flying on Air Force One and eating ribs with you. Thank you. [Laughter]

The President. You need to tell me how you want me to sign that, and I've got a special pen, and we'll sign it, and I'll bring it over there.

[Laura Harris, the Board's consultant on Native American issues, explained the diversity of her son's ethnic background and joked that since she began her work with the Board, her son said the family should no longer refer to his Scot-Irish-Oklahoman grandfather as a redneck.]

The President. That's a real advance. [Laughter]

[Ms. Harris closed by thanking the President for improving the relationship between the Federal Government and tribal governments, and Chairman Franklin concurred.]

The President. You know, let me just say—I'll be very brief, because I know we're supposed to go over to this other deal, and I think Linda's got to go. But I just want to thank you for doing this and for being brave enough to do it.

I knew when we started that all of us would be subject to some criticism because, number

one, we couldn't solve every problem in America overnight related to race; number two, you could almost relate every problem in America to race; and number three, in a cynical and weary world, it's easy to devalue the importance of people going in good faith to raise the consciousness and quicken the conscience and kind of lift the spirits of other people and encourage them to do the right thing, and then to figure out—it is a complex thing, figuring out how much of this is policy, how much of this is dialog, how much of this is community, how much of this is almost spiritual.

I think you have really made a heroic effort to come to grips with all of these elements and to make this a very important milestone on America's journey here, and I hope you'll always be proud of it. I really think—you know, it was a big risk. I knew a lot of people would say, well, we didn't do this; we didn't do that; we didn't do the other thing; or we said this, and it was wrong. And probably some of that

criticism is valid. But when you take it all and shake it up, I think there is no question that what we did at this moment, in the absence of a searing crisis, facing a future of incredible kaleidoscopic diversity, was a very good thing for our country. And I do think that we have to keep it going, and I will take all these recommendations seriously.

I hope you all meant what you said today. I hope it was a great gift for you, because for your country it was a great gift.

Chairman Franklin. We are deeply grateful to you, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you. Well, I'll see you over there—except Linda, who has an excused absence.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:20 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks on Receiving the Report of the President's Advisory Board on Race

September 18, 1998

Thank you so much. Dr. Franklin, the Advisory Board, to the Members of the Congress who are here: Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, Congressman Amo Houghton, Congressman Jay Dickey, Congressman Ed Pastor, Congressman Tom Sawyer, and Congressman John Lewis, whose life could be a whole chapter of this report. We thank you for coming. We thank Mayor Archer, Mayor Webb, Mayor Bush, Mayor Flores, Governor Thomas of the Gila River Tribe, and other distinguished Americans who are here today—business, religious, community leaders.

I thank the Attorney General; the Deputy Attorney General, Eric Holder; the Secretary of Education; the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development; the Secretary of Transportation; SBA Administrator Alvarez; Acting Assistant AG Bill Lann Lee—I hope I won't have to say that “acting” forever—[laughter]—our Deputy SBA Administrator, Fred Hochberg. Thank you all for being here.

I'm especially gratified by the presence of a large number of Cabinet members, Members of Congress, and local leaders here today. I thank the head of the Council of Economic Advisers, Janet Yellen, for being here. I'll have more to say about that in a moment. Thank you, Rosa Parks, for coming.

I want to say a special word of thanks to all the people who made this Board possible: to John Hope Franklin for his wise and patient, but insistent, leadership; Reverend Suzan Johnson Cook; Angela Oh; Bob Thomas; Linda Chavez-Thompson, who was with us in the White House just a moment ago but has what I called an excused absence—[laughter]—my long-time friends and colleagues, the former Governors of Mississippi and New Jersey, Bill Winter and Tom Kean. I thank Laura Harris, who has been a wonderful consultant for us on Native American issues. My good friend Chris Edley, thank you for what you have done. I thank Judy Winston and the staff of the President's Initiative on Race for the remarkable job they have