

Race and Civil Rights In America

Speech by Senator Bill Bradley at The National Press Club - July 16, 1991

What compels me to speak today is the state of race relations in America which every day exacts terrible costs on whites, on blacks, on all races, and on the nation. Let us begin by stating what is often unstated. Our destiny - both 'black and white - is bound together; the coal and iron of American steel. Each race, its strength inseparable from the well-being of the nation. Each race, in need of the other's contribution to create a common whole.

All races must learn to speak candidly with each other. By the year 2000, only 57% of people entering the work force will be native-born whites. White Americans have to understand that their children's standard of living is inextricably bound to the future of millions of non-white children who will pour into the work force in the next decades. To guide them toward achievement will make America a richer, more successful society. To allow them to self-destruct because of penny-pinching or timidity about straight talk will make America a second-rate power. Black Americans have to believe that acquisition of skills will serve as an entry into society not because they have acquired a veneer of whiteness but because they are able. Blackness doesn't compromise ability nor does ability compromise blackness. Both blacks and whites have to create and celebrate the common ground that binds us together as Americans and human beings.

Today, the legal barriers that prevented blacks from participating as full citizens have come down. Many notable African Americans have walked through those open doors and up the steps to the corporate boardrooms, city halls, to the statehouse and to Presidential cabinets. Many more millions of African Americans live ordinary lives in an extraordinary way in cities, towns, and farms across America. Hard-working, law-abiding families fighting to build a life for their kids; robust churches peopled by individuals of faith and commitment; educators willing to discipline and teach.

Yet 43% of black children are born in poverty. The black infant mortality rate and the black unemployment rate are twice those of white Americans.

And forming the backdrop for the urban neighborhoods where the poorest, most unstable families live is the daily violence. The number of black children who have been murdered in America has gone up by 50% since 1984. In Washington, D.C. and many other American cities the leading cause of death among young black men is murder. That violence, and the fear of it, shape perceptions in both the white and black communities. For example, if you're white you know what you think when you pass three young black men on a street at night. If you're black you know the toll that the violence takes on black families both coming and going - more college age black males are in prison than in a college. Communities cannot develop if these trends continue nor can the potential of our cities be realized behind barricades patrolled by private security guards. Crime and violence cause poverty.

Visit a public housing project in one of our big cities. See the wall pockmarked by bullet holes. Smell the stench of garbage uncollected and basements full of decomposing rats. Hear the gunshots of drug gangs vying for control of territory that the community needs for its commercial and social life but that the police don't help them preserve - territory that bankers redlined long ago.

Listen, as I have, over the last few years across America to the stories of families trying to make it in the middle of this horror. Listen, in Elizabeth, N.J., to residents of public housing describe how the drug dealers prey on the joblessness and misery of all the residents but especially the young. Listen, in Chicago to project motherly their children dodging bullets on the way to school, threatened with the murder of a younger son unless an older son joins the gang. Listen, in Newark N.J., to a grandmother, who, when asked

what she wanted mope than anything else said, “a lock that works.” Listen, in Brooklyn, N.Y., to a former cocaine dealer gone straight saying that his brother lying inert in a crack stupor in front of me on the floor of his Mother’s meager apartment was going to be killed within a year by dealers who wanted their money. Listen in Camden and Paterson, N.J., to doctors tell about crack children having crack children, alone - the fathers in prison or in an early grave - falling deeper and deeper into hopelessness. Cry out in anguish and cry out in anger about this kind of life in America today. And weep for all of us that allow it to continue.

But, go beyond tears of pity and guilt. Face the moral paradox. How can we achieve a good life for ourselves and our children if the cost of that good life is ignoring the misery of our neighbors? The answer has been to erect walls.

The wall of pride: we’re better and deserve what we have. The wall of ignore the problem and it will go away. The wall of blaming the symptoms. The wall of liberal guilt that rationalizes and distances us from the fact that people are actually being murdered. The wall of innocence: we have nothing against black people, we didn’t know. The wall of brute force, used to oppress and separate. And finally the Willie Horton wall of demonization that says they’re not like us.

All of these walls we’ve constructed have stunted our national growth and character and made us less able to lead the world by our living values. A maze we’ve seemed to lock ourselves into and are dangerously close to forgetting the way out. Put simply, there can be no normal life for blacks or whites in urban America or effective help for the ghetto poor until the violence stops.

Our failure to improve these conditions is inseparable from the fact that we no longer speak honestly about race in America. The debate about affirmative action is ultimately a debate about empowerments past debts and what each of us thinks we owe another human being. But it does not directly affect the daily lives of families struggling against violence. They worry about survival not college admissions. At the same time, we have to admit that neither Republicans nor Democrats have come up with good answers to these horrible conditions. As they say in my urban town meetings, “Very few politicians really care, or else things would already have changed.”

Liberals have failed to emphasize hard work, self-reliance, and individual responsibility. Clearly, there are thousands of individuals, like Clarence Thomas, who have exercised individual strength and perseverance to overcome the obstacles of racial and economic oppression. But he also benefited from passage of civil rights laws which broke down the legal barriers of the past. The odds of overcoming a prejudiced attitude are better because your individuality is guaranteed by law. Individual responsibility also is a challenge to our humanity as much as to our ambition. White Americans make decisions each day - who they hire or fire or who their children play with - which ripple into the tide of American race relations.

At the same time, conservatives have failed to use the power of government for the common good. Even in the face of rampant violence in urban ghettos, conservatives refuse to act. Clearly, the collective will of the nation, when channeled through legislation can be an indispensable resource in the war against injustice and poverty. But it is also true that government should be held accountable for results. Bureaucrats who fail should be fired. Government success should be measured in problems solved and in conditions bettered. Teachers should teach. Nurses should give comfort and welfare workers should listen. Government service is more than just a job.

Peoples black and white, are individuals not representatives of a racial creed. There is no African American, there are African Americans, each a distinct individual with a different view and attitude.

Yet, Americans often see race first and the individual second. That means each individual assumes all the

costs of racial stereotypes with none of the benefits of American individuality. As long as any white American looks at black Americans and associates color with violence, sloth, or sexual license, then all black Americans carry the burden of some black Americans. That is unfair. As long as any black American looks at white Americans and associates color with oppression, paternalism and dominance all white Americans wear the racist exploiter label of some white Americans. That is unfair.

It is ludicrous to say that all female black Americans are welfare queens, yet Ronald Reagan for a generation tried to etch that stereotype in the minds of his corporate, country club, and political audiences. It is ludicrous to say that all African Americans are Willie Hortons. Yet the Willie Horton ad was an attempt to demonize all black . America. If you don't believe me, ask any African American who tries to hail a cab late at night in an American city.

It is just as ludicrous to say all white Americans are Archie Bunkers, yet some self-appointed black spokespersons make a living preaching racial hate and make a mockery of the values of civil rights leaders (both black and white) who risked their lives to end segregation.

Most of us don't confront the realities of race in America today. Ronald Reagan's welfare queen distorts reality. George Bush's rapist-murderer panders to those in the electorate who can't see the individual for his color. Both cling to old relationships and old attitudes of inferiority and superiority, scapegoats and stereotypes. The ' result makes seeing the other race's perspective, much less the individual behind the color, more and more unlikely.

In the face of these problems, I challenged President Bush last week, on the Senate floor, to lead us by example and to tell us how he has worked through the issue of race in his own life.

I asked President Bush to help us alleviate five doubts about him: His record, from 1964 to the present. His choice to play the politics of race while economic inequality increases. His inconsistent words. His leadership. And his convictions.

There has been no response.

The President's silence however, will not muffle the gunshots of rising racial violence in our cities. Silence will not provide the candor necessary to overcome the obstacles to brotherhood. Silence will not heal the division among our races. Silence will not move our glacial collective humanity one inch forward.

I, for one, feel compelled to speak - to speak from my own experience, and from my heart.

I grew up in a small town of 3,492, tucked between two limestone bluffs on the banks of the Mississippi River. It was a multi-racial, multi-ethnic company town in which most of the people worked in the glass factory and were Democrats. The town had one stoplight and there were about 96 in my high school class, which integrated only in the 9th grade.

My fathers who never finished high schools was the local banker and a nominal Republican. To him a reliable customer wasn't black or white but one who paid off his loan. He used to say that his proudest moment was that, throughout the Depression, he never foreclosed on a single home.

Growing up, I sang in the church choir that was conducted by my mother. I played Little League and American Legion baseball, with black and white friends. I was a Boy Scout and I was the tallest French horn player in the high school marching band -- or perhaps any marching band anywhere.

My mother wanted me to be a success; my father wanted me to be a gentleman; neither wanted me to be a politician.

I left that small town and went to college in New Jersey and then England, but after that -- for a long time - - I never thought of politics. I was a professional basketball player for the New York Knicks. From September to May for ten years, I traveled across America with the team. It was not a high school or college team. We were professionals. Basketball was our work that we did every day - together.

Each teammate had a different set of friends in every town. But, day in and day out, we lived together, ate together, rode buses together, talked together, laughed together, and of course, played together. During those years, my dominant teammates were Willis Reed, Dick Barnett, Walt Frazier, Dave DeBusschere, and Earl Monroe. We created one of the first basketball teams to capture the imagination of a national TV audience and we won the hearts of New Jersey and New York. It was an extraordinary group of human beings.

I wish I had \$100 for every time in the last 20 years that someone - usually a white person - asked me what it was like to play on the Knicks and travel with my teammates. "What was it like?" I'd ask, "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, guys who came from such different backgrounds and had such different interests than yours."

"You mean that most of them were black? That I was living in a kind of black world?" I'd ask.

"Well yell" they'd finally admit, "What was it like on that team?"

"Listen," I'd say "traveling with my teammates on the road in America was one of the most enlightening experiences of my life."

And it was. Besides learning about the warmth of friendship, the inspiration of personal histories, the powerful role of family in each of their lives and the strength of each's individuality, I better understand distrust and suspicion. I understand the meaning of certain looks and certain codes. I understand what it is to be in racial situations for which you have no frame of reference. I understand the tension of always being on guard, of never totally relaxing. I understand the pain of racial arrogance directed my way. I understand the loneliness of being white in a black world. And I understand how much I will never know about what it is to be black in America.

I worried about all of that for a while, but then I forgot it. Because I'd known for a long time that no one was just black or just white. We were all just human, which meant we were neither as virtuous as we might hope nor as flawed as we might think. The essence Of humanity is treating each other with respect. Some of us won't be able to do that with words because we're prisoners of the words themselves. Others will be able to do it with words but never deeds. If we say "African American" but think something else, where are we?; if we say "white brother" but think something else, where are we?

People of good faith need to find common ground - and I'm not talking partisan politics. I'm talking about the human heart.

It was William Faulkner who said that man is immortal "because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice, and endurance." Politics at its best touches these things, but only rarely does it penetrate to the depths necessary to confront the turbulence in each of our hearts; rarely does it celebrate our "courage," our "honor," our "hope." We need a politics that does not divide us or demean us but helps us escape the

easy evasions, see the truth, and prevail in our humanity.

President Lyndon B. Johnson did that when he signed the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, a bill whose passage I witnessed in the Senate chamber as a student intern. The bill ended separate restrooms and drinking fountains for black and white Americans. It ended the dirty motels that blacks often had to stay in because whites excluded them from “whites only” motels. It ended the “whites only” restaurants and the buses that reserved the back for blacks.

LBJ knew Texas. He grew up poor in the Depression. He saw politicians lose because they got too close to blacks. He understood the politics of race, and still he chose to provide moral leadership.

In the Senate race in Texas that same year George Bush, the son of Eastern wealth who came to Texas to make his own fortune, ran for office as a Republican. He lost but in the course of the campaign he opposed the Civil Rights Bill being debated in Washington. The Civil Rights Bill I saw passed in the Senate. The Civil Rights Bill that Lyndon Johnson was to sign into law. Of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, candidate Bush said it “violates the constitutional rights of all people.” I still have never heard President Bush say why he believes that. I have never heard him express regret or explain why he opposed the most significant widening of opportunity for black America in the 20th century.

An enlightening and courageous response to today’s condition does not begin and end with the legal solution that was the beginning in 1964. Today’s solution must begin by accepting that the burning heart of the crisis of race in America is our individual and collective failure to address the problems of race in our own lives - and the failure of our leaders to address openly, and with moral courage the problems of race and poverty in our nation.

It is a failure when we compare the ideals of our nation with the reality in our streets. It is a failure when we compare the hopes of the privileged with the dying dreams of the disadvantaged. It is a failure when we compare our increasingly larger unskilled population with the labor needs of a growing economy. It is a failure to work through our own individual and national feelings about race. And until we correct these failures of attitude and inaction, we will not understand the meaning of race in America. This is hard to do for me, for you, for all of us, but it’s not impossible. In fact, by turning our failures into successes we will be degenerating America, improving the standard of living for all Americans and preparing ourselves for a new kind of American leadership in the world.

While no one program, or set of programs, can solve the problems of race and poverty in this nation, we, as a people, with the leadership of our President, can take steps toward a solution. I propose four steps.

First, remove the remaining legal barriers to equality of opportunity. In the context of our current debate, this means restoring those civil rights that were removed by recent Supreme Court decisions. A 1991 Civil Rights Act will take us a long way in that direction. That will be done when the president orders his staff to stop looking at this issue as a political ad and to start seeing its relevance to our ability to win the global economic race.

Second, restore and revitalize a healthy, growing economy for all Americans. A rising tide does lift all boats. We must begin to invest today for a better future for our children. This will mean lowering interest rates to encourage investment. This will mean tax relief for families with children. And this will mean difficult budget cuts in some areas in order to finance increased expenditures for programs - like Head Start and WIC that work - and for programs that will increase our productivity - programs in education, job training, health, and infrastructure.

Third, replace the politics of violence with the politics of public safety and intervene directly and massively against poverty, drugs, and violence. And by “we” I mean all concerned voices, especially those black and brown voices trapped within the swirling storm. Instead of politicians using Willie Horton to profit politically from people’s fears or outbidding each other in a contest for the most draconian punishments we need ideas to increase life chances, and timetables for action, for change and for results.

Being tough is necessary. I don’t have much tolerance for those who make millions off the destruction of a generation. That’s why we need the death penalty for drug kingpins who murder, tough sentences for drug-related crimes committed with a gun, and gun control that establishes a waiting period and a background check. But these measures alone are no guarantee of safety in your neighborhood. It’s more difficult. The violence we fear seems to erupt anywhere and for no apparent cause. The violence we fear is the violence of the predator who kills not for money or with a plan but at random, for fun and with malice.

So what we need is more police, yes. The felonies to police has increased dangerously. police too, and tougher laws. In many cities ratio of But, better there are few places where people don’t have to be vigilant. The concern is constant and pervasive. Yet, police often act as if they were an occupying army, fearful of an enemy population, responding trop their cars to emergency calls. And while they have good reason to be alert, they make arrests only to have the arrested back on the streets shortly after or if they go to Jail, replaced by another predator who ‘feels emboldened or desperate or both. The result: no improvement in safety for the majority.

The politics of public safety implies police, armed with a popular mandates out in the community building partnerships with the law abiding majorities. Together they will help to prevent crime in all neighborhoods of a city. They will Identify the indigenous resources that can form the critical base of self-help and intelligence upon which government and police assistance can be leveraged. The politics of public safety succeeds only if citizens feel more secure. Surely if a President cared about these problems he could direct his administration to come up with sharper ideas and the resources to help government agencies and local police implement them. If we are serious about reducing violence and improving safety we can do no less.

Fourth and most importantly, begin an honest dialogue about race in America by clearing away the phony issues that can never bring us together. I ask President Bush to promise never again to use race in a way that divides us. Communicating in code words and symbols to deliver the old shameful message should cease. Race-baiting should be banished from our politics. And then, I ask every American to become a part of the dialogue that lifts this discussion to the higher ground. Beginning with ourselves, each of us must address our own personal understanding or misunderstanding of race. Ask yourself, when was the last time you had a conversation about race with someone of a different race? Ask yourself what values are shared by all races? And begin to ask our leaders how they have confronted their own understanding or misunderstandings about race in their own real lives -- not just their political careers.

I commit myself to work as hard as I can for as long as it takes on each of these four steps. All of them will require concerted action and leadership wherever we can find it. Only one can be achieved by words: the last, the quest for an honest dialogue. But without it all the others could misfire - not solving the problems, or worse, being manipulated by those who would keep us from our better selves.

The other day a press person said his magazine was doing a story on racial integration - is it dying, is it changing, is it less relevant, does it hold the same appeal as it did, is America moving beyond it or away from it, is it a means or an end. I believe that integration and race and civil rights are central to our American future. They are not merely programmatic issues. They are not political trends. They are fundamental questions of attitude and action, questions of individual moral courage and the moral leadership of our nation. James Baldwin, returning from France in 1957 and counseling his nephew in 1957 not to be

afraid during the civil-rights demonstrations of the early 1960s, concludes with this:

I said that it was intended that you should perish in the ghetto, perish by never being allowed to go behind the white man's definitions, by never being allowed to spell your proper name. You have, and many of us have defeated this intention; and, by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your brothers - your lost, younger brothers. And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall forge-our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here and will again, and we can make America what America must become.