

## Speech by Senator Bill Bradley Before the Town Hall Of California

*Los Angeles, California - March 26, 1992*

Slavery was our original sin, just as race remains America's unresolved dilemma. The future of American cities is inextricably bound to the issue of race and ethnicity. By the year 2000, only 57 percent of the people entering our work force will be native-born whites. That means that the economic future of the children of white Americans will increasingly depend on the talents of nonwhite Americans. If they fail because of our penny-pinching or timidity about straight talk, America will become a second-rate power. If they succeed, America and all Americans will be enriched. As a nation, we will find common ground and move ahead together, or each of us will be diminished.

I grew up in a small town located on the banks of the Mississippi River. It was a multiracial, multiethnic factory town in which most of the people were Democrats. My father was the local banker and a nominal Republican. The town had one stoplight, and there were 96 in my high school graduating class. The Big City, St. Louis, Missouri, was something we were not.

I left that small midwestern town and went to college in New Jersey in another small town, spending most all my time in an even smaller town, the campus, except to travel to places such as New York, Philadelphia, or Providence to play basketball. I graduated, spent two years in England in a slightly larger college town, and went to New York, where for the first time I lived in a big city. The city for me was always about race as much as it was about class or power or fashion. Maybe that was because as a professional basketball player in New York I was working in a kind of black world. This was before I had any real knowledge of the welfare system, the colures and prisons, the nature of an urban economy, the sociology of neighborhoods. But if I paid attention, I saw the city through the eyes of my black teammates as well as through my own.

Above all, the city to me was never just what I heard my white liberal friends say it was. In their world, people of color were all victims. But while my teammates had been victimized, their experience and their perception of the experience of black Americans could not be reducible to victimization. To many, what the label of victimization implied was an insult to their dignity and discipline, strength and potential.

Life in cities was full of more complexity and more hope than the media and the politicians would admit, and part of getting beyond color was not only attacking the sources of inequity but also refusing to make race an excuse for failing to pass judgment about self-destructive behavior. Without a community, there could be no commonly understood standards, there could be no community. The question is whether in our cities we can build a set of commonly accepted rules that enhances individuality and life chances but also provides the glue and the tolerance to prevent us from going for each other's throats.

Urban American is not only divided by a line with blacks on one side and whites on the other. Increasingly, it is a mixture of other races, languages, and religions, as new immigrant groups arrive in search of economic promise and freedom from state control. Over four and a half million Latinos and nearly 5 million Asian Pacifics have arrived since 1970. In New Jersey, school children come from families that speak 120 different languages at home. In Atlanta, the managers of some low-income apartment complexes that were once virtually all-black now need to speak fluent Spanish. The Detroit area has absorbed some 200,000 people of Middle Eastern descent. In the San Jose phone book, residents with the Vietnamese surname Nguyen outnumber the Joneses by nearly 50 percent. In Houston, one Korean immigrant restaurant owner oversees Hispanic immigrant employees who prepare Chinese-style food for a predominantly black clientele.

Even though our American future depends on finding common ground, many white Americans resist relinquishing the sense of entitlement skin color has given them throughout our national history. They lack an understanding of the emerging dynamics of "one world," even in the United States, because to them non-whites always have been "the other." On top of that, people of different races often don't listen to each other on the subject of race. It's as if we're all experts, locked into our narrow views and preferring to be wrong than risk changing those views. Black Americans ask of Asian Americans, "What's the problem? You're doing well economically." Hispanic Americans often fail to find common ground with the historic struggle of black Americans. White Americans continue to harbor absurd stereotypes of all people of color. Black Americans take white criticism of individual acts as an attempt to stigmatize all black Americans. We seem more interested in defending our racial territory than admitting that maybe we could see things differently.

In politics for the last 25 years, silence or distortion has shaped the issue of race and urban America. Both political parties have contributed to the problem. Republicans have played the race card in a divisive way to get votes – remember Willie Horton – and Democrats have suffocated discussion of self-destructive behavior among the minority population in a cloak of silence and denial. The result is that yet another generation has been lost. We cannot afford to wait longer. It is time for candor, time for truth, time for action.

American cities are poorer, sicker, less educated and more violent than at any time in my lifetime. The physical problems are obvious: old housing stock, deteriorated schools, aging infrastructure, a diminished manufacturing base, a health care system short of doctors that fails to even immunize against measles, much less educate about AIDS. The jobs have disappeared. The neighborhoods have been gutted. A genuine depression has hit cities, with unemployment at the levels of the 1930s. Yet, just as Americans found solidarity in the midst of trauma and imaginative leadership moved us through the darkest days of the Depression, so today the physical conditions of our cities can be altered. What it takes is simply collective will, greater accountability and sufficient resources.

What is less obvious in urban America is the crisis of meaning. Without meaning, life has no hope; without hope there can be no struggle; without struggle there can be no personal betterment. Absence of meaning derived from overt and subtle attacks from racist quarters over many years and furthered by an increasing pessimism about the possibility of justice offers a context for chaos and irresponsibility. Development of meaning starts from the very beginning of life. Yet, over 40 percent of all births in the 20 largest cities are to women living alone. Among black women, out-of-wedlock births are over 65 percent. While many single women do heroic jobs in raising kids, there are millions of others who get caught in a life undertow that drowns both them and their children. Many of these children live in a world without love and without a father or any other male supportive figure besides the drug dealer, the pimp, or the gang leader. They are thrown on the street early without any frame of reference except survival. They have no historical awareness of the civil rights movement, much less of the power of American democracy. A substitute teacher in New York once told me about students who read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and wanted to know why the teacher assigned a book about Malcolm X.

To say to kids who have no connection to religion, no family outside a gang, no sense of place outside the territory, no imagination beyond the cadence of rap or the violence of TV, that government is on their side rings hollow. Their contact with government has not empowered but diminished them. To them, government at best is incompetent – look at the schools, the streets, the welfare department – or at worst corrupt – the cops and building inspectors on the take, the white collar criminal who gets a suspended sentence, the local politician with gross personal behavior. And replacing a corrupt white mayor with a corrupt black mayor won't make the difference.

In such a world, calls to "just say no" to drugs or to "study hard" for 16 years so you can get an \$18,000 a

year job are laughable. Instead of desires rooted in the values of commitment and service to community as expressed through black churches and mosques, desires, like commodities, become rooted in the immediate gratification of the moment. TV bombards these kids with messages of conspicuous consumption, and they "want it now." They become trapped in the quicksands of American materialism. The market sells images of sex, violence, and drugs, regardless of their corrosive effects on hard work and caring – values formerly handed down from an older generation. The prospect of individual political action as a path to individual and community betterment rings preposterous. With no awareness of how to change their world and no reservoirs of real self-knowledge, they are buffeted by the winds of violence and narcissism.

The physical conditions of American cities had the absence of meaning in more and more lives come together at the barrel of a gun. If you were to select the one thing that has changed in cities since the 1960s, it would be fear. Fear covers the streets like a sheet of ice. Everyday the newspaper tells of another murder. 80th the number of murders and violent crimes has more than doubled in the 20 largest cities since 1968. Ninety percent of all violence is committed by males, and they are its predominant victims. Indeed, murder is the highest cause of death for young, black males. In 1968, there were 394,000 security guards in this country. Today it's a growth industry with 669,000 guards.

For African Americans in cities, the violence is not new. You don't have to see "Boyz in the Hood" to confirm it; just visit public housing projects where mothers send their kids to school dodging bullets, talk with young girls whose rapes go uninvestigated, listen to elderly residents express their constant fear of violation, and remember the story of a former drug dealer who once told me he quit only after he found his partner shot, with his brains oozing onto the pavement.

What is new is the fear of random violence along whites. No place in the city seems safe. Walking the streets seems to be a form of Russian roulette. At the core, it is a fear of young black men. The movie "Grand Canyon" captures the feeling. It sends the message that if you're white and you get off the main road into the wrong territory, you're a target because you're white. You're a target for death, not just robbery. And if you stay on the main road, you still might be shot for no apparent reason. Guns in the hands of the unstable, the angry, the resentful are used. As the kid in "Grand Canyon" says, "You respect me only because I have a gun."

Never mind that in a society insufficiently colorblind that all black men have to answer for the white fear of violence from a few black men. Never mind that Asian Americans fear both black and white Americans, or that in Miami or Los Angeles, some of the most feared gangs are Latino or Chinese. Never mind that the ultimate racism was whites ignoring the violence when it wasn't in their neighborhoods, or that black Americans have always feared certain white neighborhoods. Never mind all that.

There are two phenomena here. There is the white fear, and there is the appearance of black emboldenment. Today, many whites responding to a more violent reality, heightened by sensational news stories, see young black men traveling in groups, cruising the city, looking for trouble. Many white Americans, whether fairly or unfairly, seem to be saying of some young black males, "You litter the street and deface the subway, and no one, white or black, says stop. You cut school, threaten a teacher 'dis' a social worker, and no one, white or black, says stop. You snatch a purse, crash a concert, break open a telephone box, and no one, white or blacks says stop. You rob a store, rape a jogger, shoot a tourist, and when they catch you, if they catch you (in 1988, out of 910,000 reports of aggravated assaults in America, there were only 37,566 convictions), you cry racism. And nobody, white or black, says stop."

It makes no difference whether this white rap is the exact and total reality in our cities. It is what millions of white Americans feel is true. In a kind of ironic flip of fate, the fear of brutal white repression felt for

decades in the black community and the seething anger it generated now appear to be mirrored in the fear whites have of random attack from blacks and the growing anger it fuels. The white disdain grows when a frightened white politician convenes a commission to investigate the charges of racism, and the anger swells when well-known black spokespersons fill the evening news with threats and bombast.

What most politicians want to avoid is the need to confront the reality that causes the fear. They don't want to put themselves at risk by speaking candidly about violence to both blacks and whites and saying the same things to both groups. Essentially, they're indifferent to the black self-destruction. Violence only hardens their indifference – not only to the perpetrator, but to all African Americans.

Physically, more white Americans leave the city – from 1970 to 1990, over 4 million white Americans moved out of our big cities. Psychologically, white Americans put up walls to the increasingly desperate plight of those, both black and white, who can't leave – those Americans who are stuck trying to raise kids in a war zone, holding jobs in a third world economy, establishing a sense of community in a desert where there is no water of hope and where everyone is out for themselves.

It's not that there isn't racism, you understand. It's alive and well. It's not that police brutality doesn't exist. It does. It's not that police departments give residents a feeling of security. Few do.

But, when politicians don't talk about the reality that everyone knows exists, they cannot lead us out of our current crisis. Institutions are no better than the people who run them. Because very few people of different races make real contact or have real conversation with each other – when was the last time you talked about race with a person of a different race – the white vigilante groups and the black TV spokesperson educate the uneducated about race. The result is that the divide among races in our cities deepens with white Americans more and more unwilling to spend the money necessary to ameliorate the physical conditions or to see why the absence of meaning in the lives of many urban children threatens the future of their own children.

Yet even in this atmosphere of disintegration, the power of the human spirit comes through. Heroic families do overcome the odds, sometimes working four jobs to send their kids to college. Many churches are peopled by the faithful who do practice the power of love. Local neighborhood leaders have thorned around a local school, organized a health clinic, or rehabilitated blocks of housing. These islands of courage and dedication still offer the possibility of local renewal, just as our system of government makes national rebirth possible.

The future of urban America will take one of three paths: abandonment, encirclement, or conversion.

Abandonment means recognizing that with the billions of investment in the national highway system which led to suburbia, corporate parks, and the malling of America and with communications technology advancing so fast that the economic advantages of urban proximity are being replaced by the computer screen, the city has outlived its usefulness. Like the small town whose industry leaves, the city will wither and disappear. Like empires of ancient days, the self-destruction has reached a point of no return and will crumble from within, giving way to new and different forms of social arrangements. "Massive investment in urban America would be throwing money away," the argument goes, "and to try to prevent the decline will be futile."

Encirclement means that people in cities will live in enclaves. The racial and ethnic walls will go higher. The class lines will be manned by ever increasing security forces and the communal life will disappear. What will replace it are deeper divisions with politics amounting to splitting up a shrinking economic pie into ever smaller ethnic, racial, and religious slices. It will be a clockwork orange society in which the rich

will pay for their security; the middle class will continue to flee as they confront violence; and the poor will be preyed upon at will or will join the army of violent predators. What will be lost for everyone will be freedom and civility and the chance to build a common future.

Conversion means winning over all segments of urban life to a new politics of change, empowerment, and common effort. It is as different from the politics of dependency as it is from the politics of greed. Its optimism relates to the belief that every person can realize his potential in an atmosphere of nurturing liberty. Its morality is grounded in the conviction that each of us has an obligation to another human being simply because she is another human being.

There will not be "a charismatic leader" but many "leaders of awareness" who champion integrity and humility over self-promotion and command performances. Answers will not come from an elite who has determined in advance what the new society will look like. Instead, the future will be shaped by the voices from inside the turmoil of urban America, as well as by those who claim to see a bigger picture. Conversion requires listening to the disaffected as well as the powerful. Empowerment requires seizing the moment. The core of conversion begins with a recognition that we will all advance together or each of us will be diminished; that American diversity is not our weakness but our strength; that we will never be able to lead the world by example until we've come to terms with each other and overcome the blight of racial division on our history.

The first concrete step is to bring an end to violence, intervene early in a child's life, reduce child abuse, establish some rules, remain unintimidated, and involve the community in its own salvation. As a young man in dreadlocks said at one of my recent town meetings, "What we need is for people to care enough about themselves, so that they won't hurt anyone else." That is the essence of community policing – getting a community to respect itself enough to cooperate and support the police so that together security is assured. And our schools can no longer allow the 5 percent of kids who don't want to learn to destroy the possibility of learning for the 95 percent who do want to learn. In addition, we need gun control, draconian punishment for drug kingpins, mandatory sentences for crimes committed with guns, and reinvestment of some defense budget savings into city police departments, schools, and hospitals.

The second step is to bolster families in urban America. That effort begins with the recognition that the most important year in a child's life is the first. Fifteen-month houses must be established for women seven months pregnant who want to live the first year of their life as a mother in a residential setting. Young fathers would be encouraged to participate too. Fifteen-month houses would reduce parental neglect or violence by teaching teenage mothers how to parent. Fifteen-month houses, by offering a program of cognitive stimulation, would prepare a child for a lifetime of learning. They need to be combined with full funding for WIC and Head Start, more generous tax treatment of children, one-year parental leave, tough child support enforcement, and welfare reform that encourages marriage, work, and assumption of responsibility, instead of having more children you can't afford.

But there is also a hard truth. No institution can replace the nurturing of a loving family. The most important example in a child's life is the parent, not celebrities, however virtuous or talented they might be. You might want to play golf like Nancy Lopez or play basketball like Michael Jordan or skate like Kristi Yamaguchi or display the wit of Bill Cosby, but you should want to be like your father or mother. And in a world with few involved fathers, mom has a big burden. There are no shortcuts here, only life led daily.

The third step is to create jobs for those who can work – jobs that will last in an economy that is growing. It is only through individual empowerment that we can guarantee long-term economic growth. Without growth, scapegoats will be sought and racial tensions will heighten. Without growth, hopes will languish.

How do we get growth? Enterprise zones, full funding of jobs corps, more investment in low-income housing. Helping to finance small businesses and providing technical assistance in management. Investment in urban infrastructure such as ports, roads, and mass transit will become a source of jobs and training for urban residents at the same time it builds part of the foundation for private investment. Allowing pension funds to be invested in urban real estate and assessing no capital gains tax on the sale of assets that have generated 500 urban jobs for 10 years will attract more investment. But no targeted program can overcome the drag of a sluggish national economy. Reducing the deficit, consuming more wisely, increasing public investment in health and education and avoiding protectionism are essential for long-term growth. Combined with assuring economic opportunity for all, long-term growth can save American cities while taking all Americans to a higher economic ground.

Finally, the political process holds the ultimate key. It has failed to address the urban prospects because politicians feel accountable mainly to those who vote. Urban America has voted in declining numbers. So politicians have ignored them. Voter registration and active participation remain the critical empowerment link. The history of American democracy is a history of broadening the vote: when the Constitution was adopted, the only Americans who had the vote were white males with property. Then, in the 1830s, it was broadened to white males without property, in the 1860s to black males, not until the 1920s to women, and finally to young people age 18-21 in the 1970s. Yet today, if one third of the voting-age population in America woke up on election day and wanted to vote, they would not be allowed to vote because they are not registered. Again what is needed is not so much charismatic leadership but day-to-day leadership, truthful leadership, dedicated to real and lasting change. Leadership that has the power within the community by virtue of the community knowing the life of the spokesperson. That is leadership that can get things done, and in the end, for change to come, decisions have to be made, work has to get done, and some group of individuals has to accept collective responsibility for making change happen.

Steven Vincent Benet once said about American diversity: "All of these you are/ and each is partly you/ and none is false/ and none is wholly true." He was describing America. Whether the metaphor is the melting pot or a tossed salad, when you become an American citizen you profess a creed. You forswear allegiance to a foreign power; you embark on a journey of development in liberty. For those who came generations ago there is a need to reaffirm principles – liberty, equality, democracy – principles that have always eluded complete fulfillment. The American city is where all these ideas and cultures have always clashed – sometimes violently. But all, even those brought here in chattel slavery and subsequently freed, are not African or Italian or Polish or Japanese. They are Americans.

What we lose when racial or ethnic self-consciousness dominates are tolerance, curiosity, civility – precisely the qualities we need to allow us to live side by side in mutual respect. The fundamental challenge is to understand the suffering of others as well as to share in their joy. To sacrifice that sensitivity on the altar of racial chauvinism is to lose our future. And we will lose it unless urgency informs our action. Excuses can no longer be accepted. Putting it on the other guy no longer suffices. The American city needs physical rejuvenation, economic opportunity, and moral direction, but above all what it needs is the same thing every small town needs: the willingness to treat another person of any race with the respect you show for a brother or sister with the belief that together you'll build a better world than you would have done alone.