Thank you very much and good morning. President Guzman, I want to thank you for your leadership. And I want to thank you especially given the occasion for your work to expand diversity and access for talented students here in Penn. Thank you, Camille Charles, Provost Ron Daniels. I'd like to thank the other people who are responsible for this forum. Professor Tukufu Zuberi, my friend DeWayne Wickham and my longtime friend Mary Frances Berry, whose article on the current state of America 40 years after the Kerner Commission I read with great interest. I want to thank her because of the work she did as the chair of the Commission on Civil Rights when I was president.

There are many people at this school that I feel indebted to, and I'm going to take a point of personal privilege to thank Penn's Emergency Room doctor, Dr. Roger Band, who travels with me overseas and keeps me from falling out in foreign countries and in the United States. And my friend as a former student at Chautauqua, New York, David Helfenstein (SAS '08) who has worked with me and my wife relentlessly and in my hope can still pass his courses at Penn because he'd been gone a lot the last couple of months.

Ladies and gentleman, I was really honored when Mary Frances asked me to be here, because when the events that led up to the Kerner Commission report took place—when I was a college undergraduate at Georgetown. I lived through the Watts riots through the eyes of a college student in 1965. I lived through the riots of Detroit in 1967 through the eyes of a college student. I remember very well when Governor Kerner and the Commission met and my own student President Johnson asked them to meet and they said.

I remember how the attention that the country might have given to the Kerner Commission report at the time was diverted first by the Vietnam War and then by the murder of Dr. King and the riots which broke out afterward, including those that broke out where I was student in Washington, DC. I remember still the searing impact of the Kerner Commission's conclusion that we were moving to a society that was black, one where people were free but unequal and had, but still the political will to act on it could not be mustered, because of the heartbreak and division and anger of the country. And of course 1968 was one of the most tumultuous years of the 20th century in the United States. It ended in the election of a new president determined to take a new direction. One that benefited politically in the short-term from the kinds of tensions that gave rise to the Kerner Report and its recommendations.

Nonetheless, 40 years later, a lot of good things have happened. A lot of the people that made those good things happen, were the people who in their youth, even and the Kerner Commission. There are more African American politicians, journalists, educators, corporate leaders and cultural icons than ever before. There is a level of communication, interaction and genuine community that did not exist 40 years ago. And I frankly think the dramatic increase in diversity in the United States, which you can see with just a glance around the crowd today, has helped us to move closer to one America at least in the minds and hearts of people with the space to make conscious movement.

On the other hand, in the last decade inequality has returned with a vengeance—and it does have a racial aspect. The racial aspect is no longer confined to the black community, but includes Hispanic Americans and many other first generation immigrants. But it leaves in its wake a quieter riot of despair that despite born of the seven cities which have increased in country where the very idea of progress requires them to decrease on a regular basis. When I was asked to serve with former President Bush on a little commission to raise some money after Katrina, to donors, there and try to figure out what could be done about it. I saw in vivid terms the same thing Dr. King had seen more than 40 years earlier—thousands of our brothers and sisters in an air tight cage of poverty amidst an affluent society. And I think it is very important that we just start with the simple acknowledgement that widespread and consistent poverty is today to be found in every urban area of America, in Philadelphia, Detroit, in New York and Harlem, where I was in television places larger and small. And so for all the progress we've made in politics and culture, we haven't done nearly as well in changing the daily lives of ordinary citizens who lose their jobs in a bomb in a hurricane and we lose those opportunities and shared responsibilities. We did make a lot of progress, again I will say and I don't want to minimize that. The rise of the black middle class, the general acceptance of people from other life styles and the recognition that this is a country of enormous significance, inconceivable, when I was a boy growing up in the segregated South, when it was an act of high courage and high drama when the Little Rock Nine braved their way through the heat in the sun. This the American that grew up in that era, my life was shaped by the triumphs and tragedies that were both heart-breaking and thrilling. The March on Washington in 1963, the passage of the Civil Rights Act in '64, the Voting Rights Act of '65, and the triumphs and the tragedies of Dr. King and President Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy. We have to say to all that stuff is inconceivable today, though we also have to look at what life is like for people who will never run for office, who will never be in television places larger and small, and will never have a chance to attend the University of Pennsylvania.

People of color do have more opportunities than ever, but there are gaping disparities at the grassroots level. That's the heartbreak of what happened in the last couple of decades. The other was to try to identify and address the disparities. The last message I left to Congress on Martin Luther King's birthday, my last day in office was that we had been a decade or two years that we had to do something to eliminate poverty and with inequality growing. And so as you look ahead to what we should do, again let us identify the continuing disparities. What are the things that drive us apart, that prevent us from becoming one America?

You know, I basically had two enormous commitments on the race question when I was president. One was to have a country of shared benefits and opportunities, beginning with all the appointments we made to the cabinets, to the judgeships and everything, but also in changing the economy. The other was to try to identify and address the disparities. The last message I left to Congress on Martin Luther King’s birthday, my last day in office was that we had been a decade or two years that we had to do something to close the disparities by race, in income, employment, education, health care and incarceration, and what we do with people once they get out of prison.

So I'm going to begin by just saying if you agree with that, and we're presumably going to have more questions on that, you have to ask yourself a couple of questions. Number one, can government policy make a difference and number two, can you make a difference? That's the most important. Those are the most important questions, so not to go back to
quire this. Poor people of color make a lot of money. If you got more of them into the banking system, you could give more loans made back into the communities under the Community Reinvestment Law, but if it’s not enforced, it is profoundly important. We should also do more to make college affordable again, to reduce the dropout rate, to tell kids when their in junior high school that if they do the things they need to do, they will be able to go to college. As a result of this year’s political season to me is how many people realize what a terrible mistake we made in this last decade to make it more difficult for some of our lowest income kids to pay for college. And then there’s a lot more people, why shouldn’t the government return to an agressive loan effort to loan money directly at low interest rates instead of letting private loan companies with federal insurance charge kids up to 20% for these loans.

Hilary and I were broke when we were students. We had to borrow money to go to school. We got loans on the National Defense Education Act for 2%. And I think this is really important—allowing everybody of the pay the full cost as a percentage of their income, allowing people to teach their loans off. I got to teach some of my loans off because I was a teacher. Why shouldn’t teachers and nurses and police officers and firemen and mental health workers and people who serve in the community at the grassroots level, be able to erase the value of their loans if they do that? Government policy matters. The failure of government policy matters. On every one of these issues, I’ve been concerned with what I was president was something I could not stop. When the Congress was taken over by the Republicans in ’95, in the Omnibus Education Bill, which had the student loan money for every student which Penn and throughout the country, and all the other higher education money and a lot of the research money, the Republican majority put in an amendment which forbade any college from accessing Pell grants for prisoners. So we went from having 120 college education programs for prisoners when the country, down to about 11, four of which were in New York State, where I live now, largely funded by private sources. This was a really dumb thing. But it highlighted a problem I did nothing to make better because I thought I got 100% of my loans off. 750,000 people get out of prison or jail every single year. There are almost no services to ease their transition back into society, there are now no guarantees of getting them education training which they need, and I know the COPS program and other things, there are now no longer enough efforts to keep them from going there in the first place. You want to do something to close the racial divide in America? Do more to keep people out of jail, do more to educate them when they’re in there and have an aggressive program to aid people’s transition back into normal society. This is about to become a hot issue because the sentencing commission has reduced the disparity for people of color and they’re about to make a lot of the people eligible for parole. Most of the people who went to prison should have been let out a long time ago and were young, and waiting in the system. They’re young with no education, and they’re coming out with no tools to succeed. We have to do something about this. You look at the experience of every last college or university that ran a prison higher education program, income is the basic’s nearest thing to a perfect success you’ll ever find in terms of no trouble while incarcerated and no repeaters when they get out with a college degree. This is a big deal. This is something that government policy should fund but they should support. And finally, as a society, I will come back to— that sort of exhausts what I want to say about it, and I don’t want to mix the things but— there are things that we can do as private citizens here too. You know, we say that we are a country of second chances, we say when somebody serves their time, they are supposed to get to start again. We don’t mean it. That is the last enduring Scarlet Letter in American society. You can mess up in nearly any way in the world and you can start again. But if you’re a poor uneducated person who goes to jail, when you get out, you got a letter on your forehead. And people don’t really believe you’re entitled to a second chance. You want to do something to honor the administrative prerogatives of the Kerner Commission, to give every body a second chance. We don’t do it in anything like the aggressive way we should. And this is an area where you don’t just need government policy, this is something that has to be done in a systemic fashion. There is a lot of young people coming out of prisons, and most of them are young, have a different set of challenges. But it’s a very big issue, and I regret more than I can say that we didn’t do more on it. It became politically impossible since my party lost the Congress, but it’s a big deal.

And let me just mention a couple of other things. The government policy can make a difference in reducing the health care disparities but you have to it will be led by people or at for.

Well, doubling the earned income tax credit for low-income earners alone lifted two million kids out of poverty. Just that one thing. And if you made it simple and more sweeping, you could lift a lot more out. I think if I had a good plan for this huge project that we do with Acorn, with Operation Hope and others trying to get people to apply for the earned income tax credit. Because when we did it, the Congress was relatively hostile to it and you practically need a PhD in paperwork to figure out how to get your earned income tax credit, but there are a lot of grassroots organizations that help people to do it. But you want to respond to the demands of the Kerner Commission and the fundamental principle that education is one way to keep people isolated in where they can live and can’t get around, you are going to have to reduce these disparities persist, particularly in urban areas if the jobs are growing in one area and the people are living in another area, that will have to be doubled through the enterprise loans, through the markets initiative, community development financial institutions, which is just sort of a fancy word for saying we started a microcredit loan program in urban areas. America rather like the one that won her the Nobel Prize for Muhammad Yunus, a couple of years ago.

And, maybe most important of all and least understood, is we have not spending the money we actually enforced the Community Reinvestment Act, which had been on the books since the 1970s and required banks who took deposits from people of color to make investments in them and their neighborhood. And banks had to do was enforce it, to turn good intentions into positive changes in other people’s lives. You want to do something to close the income and wealth disparity? Look at whether we are actually enforcing the laws that require this. Poor people of color make a lot of mon-
Conversation between Former President William Clinton, DeWayne Wickham and Tukufu Zuberi

TZ: Thank you very much. We start with a question. Mr. President, the Kerner Commission report was motivated by 164 race riots and race rebellions of varying magnitudes in the country with events like those race rebellions and the original decision to create the center. How did they surface the lasting racial inequities that plague American society, yet only 3 years after Hurricane Katrina and 1 year after Jena, the media is posing the question, Does race still matter? You initiated a conversation on race that many of us thought was long overdue, yet that conversation is not taking place. How can we create a sustained national conversation about racial inequality that leads to concrete solutions?

WC: At first, I think I kind of say this in an oblique way so let me try to be more explicit. I think that one of the difficulties of this is that the sort of mediators of popular culture, the people who give information to voters at every level, for them race doesn't matter so much anymore. I mean that in a positive way, like you know, for a lot of people who are the filters or the funnels, if you will, of information to voters and to decision makers. All the political progress we've made. We look at not just Senator Obama but the African American governors and members of Congress and mayors. Look at it; it's just a different world there. We have black people voting for white people, white people voting for black people; it's a different world. And then you say, not just Oprah Winfrey, but Morgan Freeman or Samuel L. Jackson or anybody else in the culture and what I was trying to say in my remarks is that the people who get this information, the message you want to voters and to citizens, and to people at the community level have to understand that we have done work better in politics and culture than we have done on the ground. And that is still, whether it is racial in intent or not is irrelevant. Given the past, there is a racial disparity in income, education and especially wealth generation, you saw that starting in 1975 where the actual even with the rising of black middle class in this decade because of other economic factors, black family wealth is actually diminished in this decade. We need to get people to celebrate the political and cultural advances, but realize that underneath that macroeconomic, racial and social disparities. Celebrate the way the Penn student body looks, I can look out here and see it, but recognize that it's only a small slice of America's young people. I think that's the trick. You have to make the people who drive the information flow see that. Not to make them feel guilty or bad but just to get to the facts of the matter. That's my best thought about it.

DW: Mr. President, I'm struck by the fact that I'm once again seated to your left. You may recall that in 1995 when we first met in the White House we were seated at the cabinet table and I was introducing all the members of our group, an organization of black columnists and I thought it was quite pithy for me to point out that I was going to introduce this gathering from my favorite position, I said from the left. And you responded by saying the Nation is moving back to the center, and how does that fact impact the Kerner Commission’s warning about this nation becoming two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal?

WC: Well let’s look at the difference between then and now. What I meant was we were moving back to the center from the far right where we were and I think the center has moved again because I think this has been an interesting period. Until the 2006 election, from January 2001 to January 2007, were the only 6-year period since the rise of the eugenic righting of the Republican Party. African American people ever had a chance to see how it would work as opposed to how it sounded. So what I think now is, the center has moved to the left, if you will, in the sense that there is a lot more openness across the political spectrum to common solutions and to having the government involved in it. And then there is also the inescapable implications of our interdependence. That is, there are a lot of wealthy people in New York City who made a lot of money in this decade, many of them even Republicans, who understand that there is a limit to how far you can string out if the poor people who live 5 miles away from where they work can’t get an education, can’t have a home, can’t build a family, can’t have a future. I think that the consciousness of our interdependence and the implications and obligations it imposes has moved the center in a more inclusive direction.

DW: And yet, Mr. President, when you look at all the indicators, conditions for many African Americans are not as good as they were in 2001, certainly.

WC: No, that’s right, that’s why the thing is moving. That’s what I’m saying. When President Bush was elected, he said the rhetoric that had been driving them since 1980. Because there was a period of time where, I think, President Reagan had a Republican Senate but never a Republican House. The American people never got to live with the consequences of the policies behind the rhetoric of the right wing of the Republican Party until President Bush was elected with a Republican Congress. And I think even the Republicans know that, which is why they nominated Senator McCain instead of somebody to the right of him. I mean I just think that, you know, their deal didn’t work very well and we all got to live with it. And so that was the fact that this consciousness of our interdependence is rising. I think that we’re in a place now where we are worse off than we were in 2001, but we are in a place to do better now than we did in the nineties. If we do the right things on energy, on healthcare, on education and on empowering people in all kinds of populations that are likely to be left out. I believe the next 4-8 years can be better than the period in which I served for African Americans and for others who have been marginalized. I honestly believe that.

TZ: Mr. President, during your presidency, the nation underwent one of the longest sustained economic booms in its history. Also during this period, more people were imprisoned than in the five previous decades. 61% more than during the 1980s. Due to this explosion in the prison population, which makes up 5% of the world's population accounts for, on some accounts, almost 25% of the world's prison population. The explosion has had a profound impact on African Americans, with one in three African American males from the ages of 18 to 35 are under some kind of criminal justice supervision. This is having a devastating impact on their access to jobs, education and even their right to vote. What can be done to deal with the racial biases in the criminal justice system, especially those which have accelerated in the last few years?

WC: Well I think first the senate and commission’s reduction of the disparity between crack cocaine and powder cocaine was a good
start. But we really ought to have one order, there should be no disparity there. And I think this whole thing is just a hangover from when the great basketball player Len Bias tragically died after doing crack and the country just made a mistake. We went over the hill and got rid of the disparity and I think the Supreme Court decision giving the judges the power to waive the mandatory minimum sentences is a good thing, a good start in the right direction. But I believe we have to have many more diversion efforts. I mentioned this in my talk. When I was president we funded one national task force on drug abuse, in Minnesota and Janet Reno when she was a prosecutor called the Drug Courts, which would allow large numbers of people who would otherwise have been sent to jail not to go to jail. And I think from my point of view, we should be intervening in the year or 2 or 3 before young people are most likely to get involved with the criminal justice system to make connections, tell people they can go to college, tell people they can have a future. Give them something to say yes to, not just something to say no to. And then I believe that we should have had to keep ourselves what we think the next president could get into this, or the way the federal government could get into this to have the Civil Rights Division actually do a report to the Congress, and to the president, to the American people about the patterns of prosecution and what underlies them and whether we can afford to have any sentencing distinctions and I always think if people just knew they were being looked at it might make a difference. It might make people ask questions of themselves. Now in addition to that, to go back to what you said, in addition to civil rights enforcement. I think there should be an intense effort by the Justice Department both to educate all the US attorneys and the prosecutors throughout the country, who are not in the jurisdiction of the federal government but are bound by the Constitution to look at what they’re doing, look at what the patterns are, and honestly ask themselves whether they could find alternatives to incarceration for dealing with these young people. Now once you get away from that, one step removed from that, are prevention programs to keep people in school and on a path to success. But I think you have to, my own view is you should have overall oversight of the Civil Rights Division involve oversight by the Justice Department with the local prosecutors and then aggressive intervention in the schools and in the neighborhoods.

**DW:** You once said that the creation of a multicultural, multiethnic America would be the third great revolution in this country. When is that going to occur?

**WC:** It’s occurring already, the problem is that’s what I was trying to say earlier. Look out there, there it is. This is much more interesting crowd than it would have been if we’d had this meeting 30 years ago I can guarantee you. If we had it ten years after the Kerner Commission report there would have still been too many white guys in suits out there with gray hair like me. I’m glad my demographic’s not been entirely eliminated from the audience but the student body is mostly black. There are more people from other countries here, there are more people from other countries here, there is more religious diversity. We are getting there, the problem is we are getting there with one stratum of our society and leaving the rest out. So let me just give you an example that I see now as I’m sort of a free campaign worker. You see in the alienation and the potential alienation of people from each other, where you see some African Americans in areas where the jobs have been lost thinking that the real answer to their problems is immigration. If that if we didn’t have so many immigrants, they would have jobs and their incomes would be higher and people who would be, let’s say, Christian conservatives, so they are Republicans, they think the problem is illegal immigration, or both communities think it’s trade. And so are we going to pith communities against one another? The reason is, they are not part of the multicultural, multiethnic society you see in the auditorium. They are just grabbing and holding on and trying to get through the day. So I’ll say again, that the goal ought to be, not to create the society. It’s being created before our very eyes and we can’t stop it because of its wonderful and exciting and it’s a better way to live. The purpose of government in any policy should be to allow a large number of people that are underneath looking up at it, suffocating and let them move up into it.